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ONCE ON THE SUMMER RANGE



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ONCE ON THE SUMMER RANGE

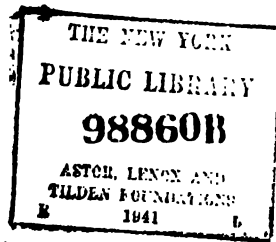
BY
FRANCIS HILL

"Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience"

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1918

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TO
H. V.



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FOREWORD

Life takes its casual toll of us, and we submit as we may. I wish it to be definitely understood, however, that I, for one, do not submit with the thing we call grace. Fall in under the lash I must, of course. But at least I reserve the right to be resentful.

There was a certain house I used until lately to go to; a beautiful Italian-like white stucco house, lodging a man and a woman and their burden of stored memories. Intellectuals both, this man and this woman; yet human as beggars; kindly; unique and irreplaceable friends. Now they are lost to me in the immense wastes of the sea. The beautiful white stucco house where I was so often made welcome is empty and dark. Soon only strange feet, strange voices, will be heard in those barren rooms.

My friends were among the earliest to be scuttled and slain by the bowelless sea-monsters with whose aims and customs we have since become so hideously acquainted. When last seen on the careening upper deck of their ship (great stricken creature in the throes) they stood lightly entwined in each other's arms; eyes watchful; heads erect; calmly waiting the foamy sucking swirl of the gray Atlantic waters. He was then fifty-eight years old, she fifty. They had done everything a sympathetic clear-brained man and woman could do, in those final catastrophic moments, by way of neighborliness and help. In return, many a desperate hand had sought frantically to snatch her away from him and crowd her into one of the bedlam tangled life-boats.



FOREWORD

Also had he passionately striven against her in this matter. But obviously it had never occurred to her to quit him.

The last boat gone, there they clung to the nearly perpendicular deck, lightly caught in each other's arms, without saving belts (how petty must have seemed a cork jacket in that leviathan wallow!), not sad, meeting their fit romantic doom with bright and curious eyes.

True, they were no longer young. The unhoarded years lay generously behind them. They had no children to think of. Yet, after all, it was magnificent and simple and imaginative, worthy of them as they had been.

For their lives had become them, too. Only less splendid than the triumph of their death was another episode of younger days; and this, luckily, as if aware of the nearness of their end, they had just latterly put into free and orderly writing.

Here it is.

BIRKETT LANCHARD.

(For thirty years working associate
with John Matthew Hainlen.)

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ONCE ON THE SUMMER RANGE

1





ONCE ON THE SUMMER RANGE

CHAPTER FIRST

MATT HAINLEN GOES TO PIECES

One dank day toward the middle of March I dropped in to see a couple of big Fifth Avenue doctors. That was away back, in 1884. Now it is August of 1914. The thirtieth anniversary of my marriage has somehow come and gone. Crackling and roaring, the incessant hellish guns of the Great War have begun on their ghastly task of splitting up the world. We cannot do the lazy month in Russia, as we had planned. I must try to bear all this — everything — in a kind of due relation. Perhaps the writing will help.

So (I start again), on that foggy morning in the spring of '84, when I was twenty-seven years old, I dropped in to see a couple of big, solid, careless-speaking Fifth Avenue doctors. No doubt they were bored — these gentlemen — with the mean shams and trivialities of their profession, tired and dry and getting a bit elderly, precisely as I, the architect, am now. Then I couldn't understand. But how well I recall the chill intonation, the aloof eyes, that went with the outrageous thing they said.

"Spend the summer absolutely in the open. Don't draw, don't read, don't study. Don't do anything

with your head. Go west. Eat out, sleep out. Don't come back inside of six months. Then we'll be ready to have another look at you."

In one petty fashion, at least, I got even with that pair of Olympian consulting-room brutes. I did as they told me. I went west, stayed six months. But they did not have another look at me when I came back. Of trouble, when I came back, I had my complete share. Only, nothing could now well have tempted me to take it to such a quarter.

Let me just report of myself that I was born in Pittsburgh. My grandfather, a French designer and cutter of stained glass from Rouen, came to this country as a middle-aged man; and, after the usual series of destructive vicissitudes in New York, shortly settled for good in Pittsburgh, going into the art glass business there on his own. But it was my father who really made himself the center of that well-placed Western Pennsylvania business, which flourished from the beginning. Old Grandfather Hainlen never managed to pick up much English; and my father, with the rigid training and fine tradition of the European glass artist behind him, was in fact a man of exceptional intelligence and natural endowment. Also two of his younger brothers presently branched out into an allied contractor-builder partnership there in Pittsburgh. Sober and careful, these flourished, in their way, no less than the main glass stem. All in all, it amounted to a rather prosperous, rather happy and (I daresay) rather generally competent and characteristic French-American family group.

By the time I had come along (not to make too drab a story), I was, as the elder son of lineal Christopher



Hainlen, heedfully culled out of the large connection to be an architect. That seemed the next fitting step forward, the family agreed. My father and uncles were by now wielding some quite sufficient professional influence, and ambitiously they conspired together to pave a brisk and open road for me. On my part, therefore, I could of course only back their generous clan efforts with as honest and considerable a show of industry as I had in me.

Some respectable aptitudes I must have had, on the whole, too. My father, a close-thinking serious man, did not put me through the regular school and university routine. It is a severe lack, as I have often since felt. But he took me to Europe on his various artistic pilgrimages with him; and, all in fair order, set me to study in New York with Randolph, Gay and Whetford. It was in that office, a notable metropolitan workshop of sound architectural craft, that my health broke down.

Well, enough, for the moment. "Go west. Eat out, sleep out. Don't come back inside of six months. . . ."

Montana! . . . Am I, in cold reality, vaulting thirty crowded years? . . . That first view of the great spaces, silent and imposing! What it did to me! How it startled, stung, vivified, exalted! . . .

It was not chance that led me to light on Montana. Though I did not know a living soul west of the Mississippi, and made no effort to hear of anybody, I yet chose Montana with studious deliberation, from a map. Those beastly cold-lipped New York doctors had said "the open." Good! I would pick out the biggest available stretch of geographical open in the United

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States. That should be Texas, to be sure. Only, Texas was not available in summer, on account of the heat. So! Montana came next, then; and the huge romantically named northern territory gripped my eyes as invincibly on the map as if there had been no alternative place.

I was at home (in Pittsburgh) now, my mother and sisters and cousins clinging in wide-eyed consternation about me. I held them off, packed some bags, bought a ticket, and, in a rain of family tears, boarded a gloomy night express for Chicago.

My ticket read to Helena. But I kept my ears continually pricked for cues along the road, especially after our crawling Northern Pacific train had passed through the Bad Lands and was actually on Montana soil. At each of the long way-stops I would get out and talk with whomever I could find that would talk to me — peer inquisitively about. Finally, at Livingston, I decided to take my courage in my two hands and make the break. So there, within sight of the far mottled sides of the tumbling Crazy Mountains, I bade that railroad good-by, turned my face from the dusty new transcontinental tracks, and embarked on my terrific adventure.

I daresay that, as an adventure age, twenty-seven is none so overpoweringly young. I do not advance it as such. Nevertheless, in the spring of '84, twenty-seven years and all, I must still have borne some edge of youth in me. We artist-artisan Hainlens were an industrious family, and I had not had much time to be young before. Anyway, judging by my own case, I doubt if real life is ever to be measured off in terms of astronomy.

From Livingston, that vivid troubled April, after a day or two, I zigzagged slowly north into the territory, traveling at first by coach, then on horseback. For I soon made out that the famous navigator at sea without compass was as nothing to the pilgrim in this country without a horse. There is no mistaking the harshness of the old western dictum against horse-stealing. But now I had a sudden acute glimpse of understanding into all that. To rob you of your horse out here on the lonely wide-spaced range was truly much worse than simply taking away your good name.

My saddle and pony I bought one morning in a wicked little cow-town, and, to my inexpressible amazement, I was not pitched off, then or later.

Note how, in declaring this transaction, I instinctively mention the saddle before the horse. I can't be western enough for that. No, it is just one of those unsuspected, unrelated outcrops of the poison of money, infecting the mind of even a passably unsordid elderly artist. That long-ago Montana stock-saddle was a mere well-made piece of leather, wood and steel. But it cost me sixty dollars. For the pony — who probably saved my life a time or so, and whom I certainly grew to love above any of the thirty or forty thoroughbreds I have since owned — for the pony, observe, I paid only twenty-two dollars and a half. Therefore, a generation afterward, with all this churning deep inside me again, automatically I say — "saddle and horse!"

That first morning I named my new mount Crow, on two scores. He was nearly white in color; and he was rumored to have emerged out of the dim background of history as a stolen Crow Indian horse. He must have been eleven or twelve years old when I bought him, and weighed, perhaps, with all on, in the neighbor-

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hood of seven hundred pounds. But what he didn't know about things — the conventions of the great Montana stock range! The cowboys, I soon learned, despised his whitish color because of the usual lack of stamina going with it. For me — I can but speak for my pilgrim self. Old Crow delighted me.

I used to reflect, when I was dull, for an hour at a go on the probably high-colored variations of his early Indian and "rustled" career. Any baby could tell he had lived through a lot. He was wise to the point of owliness; tolerant, seasoned, kindly; fleet and willing and able; hard, to my positive knowledge, as the granite rocks. Within two hours after I had crossed his back, I showed the rare sense to trust myself absolutely to his experience. Inspiration will now and then fall like that on the blindest. Never once did I have occasion to doubt the old Injun beggar; and for some weeks we drifted on practically alone together, most dependent, nakedest of friends; almost next of kin.

The endless procession of gray-and-green miles he jogged me, those heavenly weeks! The patterns of sage and lupine — the perpetual, ever-shifting horizon-line of mountain! I may say that I had just no notion at all of spending this summer in idleness. Cow-punching I was not so innocent as to dream I could aspire to. Nor yet horse-wrangling. Early one morning I ran into a round-up, and saw a twister rope out and ride a fresh bronc. Not a "bad un," the ring of grinning boys were careful to explain to me. "No outlaw, you savvy — only a plain ornery little old scrub cayuse."

That exhibition of the plain ornery little old scrub cayuse effectually frightened me past the gate of every future horse and cattle ranch along my road. I had a

dreadful fear I might some day lose my mind, find myself up on the back of such a horse by mistake. The picture haunted me. Bland nuzzling Crow, friendly white Crow—I caressed his scrag-neck with a profound new lift of gratitude! I wanted to go home in the fall, I whispered to him, and become a practicing architect.

But sheep, now. Pilgrim and all, I somehow got hold of the idea that I could herd sheep. As a matter of fact, a dozen or more cowboys along the road had told me, with inconceivably brutal jeers, that anybody could herd sheep who would. The only difficulty, they swore, was to find anybody who would. . . .

I would, I promptly determined. I was here for health: you did not expect unmixed good. But, on the face of it, a summer on a sheep ranch seemed to serve my turn mighty well. “Eat out, sleep out.” Besides, if there were really something especially nasty in that famous Old Testament habit of living under the stars with sheep! . . . At least my knowledge of the world would be, in so far, enriched. So up I touched the drowsing Crow with my unrowelled heels. Allons, brother! To the sheep!

Ah, that spring riding! I had never smelled wet sage before, never swung so close to the big white-coped mountains, never done any of all this. It was May by now, with the last wisps of snow quite gone from the highest of the superb long valleys, and the bunch-grass everywhere starting up, and the whole range a riot of little, exquisite wild-flowers.

Lately I was reading a story, a marvel in miniature, by one of those terrible Russians. A man of forty-two, who has spent most of his life in the country, says

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—"I cannot recall a single spring." Imagine — forty-two — not one spring! Thank God my fate has not been like that. The piercing splendor of the strange Maytime thirty years ago — why, it is as near me now as if a night had not intervened!

Easy mile after mile I sat my jogging old Crow. The blueness of the sky, the soft streaming delicacy of the few tender clouds, the brilliance of the air — they made one drunk with love of life! When a lark rose suddenly up out of a patch of wild meadow and thrilled the immense bright vault with her song — my God, no, the vividness, the sheer pellucid beauty — it was almost not to be endured.

And the delicious new tang of well-being that waked in my body! Day after day, the sweet fresh vigor of that pungent-smelling earth seemed literally to flow up my horse's short legs and pass into my flesh. I was not weak, not nervous, not ill. Already I could have faced sharp round and gone back home to work. Not that I really ever had any thought of such thing!

Presently we struck due east on our trail — old Crow and I — and entered the Pinto Basin. We had a distinct destination in view now; and, just at sunset one windy strong-colored evening, made it.

The home buildings of the Swallowfork sheep ranch were an ugly and evil-smelling clutter of sheds, barns and corrals, with no accompanying house room to speak of, on the head-waters of Fishduck River. I had heard far below that the Swallowfork needed men desperately; so I took little chance of rebuff in thrusting myself before the powers here in the rôle of errant job-seeker. The Swallowfork was clear and away the biggest sheep ranch in this part of the country. Tek

Gaines, sheriff of Piegan County, owned and operated it without living on it—operated it on a gigantic scale. Right now it was in the fullest swing of lambing, with shearing immediately on the cards, or, rather, beginning to overlap.

Even in this present mad whirl of activity, however (and I ask you to believe it *was* a mad whirl!), Gaines himself did not seem to be on the place. His foreman, Bull Dorgan, I eventually found among a huddle of thoroughbred Merino ewes and lambs in a pen. Bull looked me over scowlingly for one minute, then, despite my obvious greenness, gruffly told me to spread my blankets in the hay-barn and turn my hoss into the corral.

So that night old Crow ranged out in the Pinto with a bunch of the regular Swallowfork ponies, and I modestly slipped into membership of the lamb-smacking crew of the same chaste outfit. Also, that night, I ate my first meal—a hearty, fundamentally complete and satisfactory ranch supper, including pie—prepared by the stubby freckled hands of Scaramouch.

CHAPTER SECOND

SCARAMOUCH, AND THE LAMB-CAMP

We had some queer names on the dog-eared ranch book. I did a bit of clerical work for Dorgan — I had access to that book. But never think my good friend the second cook was libeled down there as “Scaramouch.” He had a real name, a Viking name, a name to build stout northern dreams with. Eric Ericson! Or, that is, by logic, Eric son of Eric, descended direct, perhaps, from Eric the Saint, or Eric Bloody-Axe, or Eric Bright-Eyes. I can’t say over the words, right now, without a little throb of pride, of glory; a stir of incipient heroism. And against that, if you please — my derisive tag — Scaramouch — lowest of the stock clowns of low old Italian farce — a coward, a zany, a poor belabored rascal — the butt of every scurvy horse-play. Scaramuccia! . . . Already I had begun to saturate myself in the Italian modes.

As for Eric Ericson of the Swallowfork ranch — him I came to know well, in the prosaic flesh. It was an honor. In fifty-seven more or less packed and gregarious years I have not once met his like; so disinterested, so undevious, so faithful, a fiber. And yet, with the best heart in the world, I could never from the first think of him, or call him to myself, by anything but that filthy Scaramouch. The human brain is a curious ironic mechanism. Play of heart, certainly, has noth-

ing whatever to do with it. Old devoted friend, lusty dead friend! . . .

But to the adventure — that inextricably delicate and rowdy adventure. After twenty-six years of bedrooms, this philosophy of “spreading your blankets” just wherever you happened to be, was, I ask you to credit, an experience. I liked it, on the whole, no end. I even liked improvising a ranch bunk-house out of a hay barn. Only, the scarecrows — the rats and jail-birds — I now had for room-mates!

Of the patriarchal sheep-herding of Abraham, Isaac, Laban, and so on, I know little enough. But the special quality and weight of opprobrium attached to the practice of the trade in Montana in the year 1884! . . . Yes, I *did* get that, all right. The fact is, the thing must have been bad, even in Cain’s day. In his dealings with his elder brother, Jacob behaved rather like a modern sheep-herder. The cold truth seems to be that long and close contact with sheep is irresistibly degrading. I watched the process begin to work in myself.

That first night on the Swallowfork I slept joyfully. But by daylight next morning I was up and out in the pens with the other smackers, and by sundown that night was ready to rave and froth at the stinking, bawling mass of ewes and lambs with the best, or the worst, of them. . . . No — I must do myself that merit! Not with the worst.

For the worst of those Swallowfork lamb hands were just about past belief. In the dewless chill radiance of first dawn, I caught a good look at them; and shudders trickled up and down my spine. I had, to be sure, heard the wretches talk by the dim supper lamplight

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and as they afterwards sprawled on their blankets in the complete dark of the barn. But I suppose I am the trained draughtsman: I have to *see* a thing — see it orderly and sharp and scaled — before I can really appraise it. And in that ruthless Montana dawn light — those unholy faces, those slouching defiled bodies! They did appal one. How could any ordinarily decent, normal man live six months with such cosmic offscourings?

If I had not had my old white pony there, with the consequent safe feeling that I could pull out at any minute. . . . However, I don't know. I am of a fairly tenacious turn. Anyway, relief soon hove in sight.

After a grimy two-weeks' apprenticeship in the home-ranch pens, I was abruptly sent out, in a crew of four men, to establish an overflow lamb-camp some clear hitch off from the main sheds. That is to say, by this time the earliest-dropped lambs were considered old enough and strong enough to be able to follow their mothers about, with a little extra care, over the regular feed range. What with ewes and lambs together, this first crop, on the Swallowfork, made up a pretty formidable bunch of sheep. The grass close to the home-ranch was rapidly being eaten off: it became absolutely necessary to ease the strain there, in favor of the heavy bands still being held on for shearing. So my good fairy won me a toss. I was picked to help drift that big and constantly growing strong lamb band out toward the hills.

The new shack and corrals lay at some four or five miles distance from the ranch base, at the head of a wide, shallow, undulating-sided bare coulée, in plain view of the timber, with a small quantity of excellent

water just above us and a wealth of feed on every hand. I daresay all the hegriras of life have been dictated by like considerations of grass, in one form or other. Our coulée herd-squad consisted, besides myself, of Scaramouch; a sulky, squinting, hard-featured boy of about eighteen (he could not have been more than a season past that) named Rafe Doerck; and a veined-nosed, evil-minded, rather efficient middle-aged scoundrel called Whiskey — Whiskey Flynn, if I remember the ranch-book spelling.

Rafe Doerck — there — the accursed words! Rafe Doerck — eighteen years old — nine years my junior! God, the madness of it! Why, in any civilized community, the fellow should have been tied yet to a school form. But age meant nothing out here. And when, behind the eighteen years, wound generations of rapacity and stealth and crime! . . . Still — still — this was a lad — a mere, terrible, unthinkable lad! . . .

Bizarre as it may seem, I in a sense captained that our charming branch outfit. I was, in the first place, the only one of the four who had a horse. I did not drink raw alcohol out of a bottle. I fancy I dare even, without unnatural pride, say that I had certainly been a good deal less brutal and cruel with the beautiful, brainless little china-eyed lambs than most of the other men in the sheds at the lower ranch. Moreover, though I was so abysmally green, I had yet discovered a kind of knack with stock in myself; a kind of persuasive touch. Bull Dorgan, a capital foreman, might conceivably have marked these slight points down. He did not, understand, put me in actual charge up here at the coulée. He simply addressed all his orders to me.

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So, at this snap bid of Chance, we four strangers settled down to some weeks of living together in the tolerably narrow quarters of that foothill shack. Every day or two fresh squalling battalions of ewes and lambs were driven up to us. Scaramouch, who had been only an assistant cook at the home-ranch, did the cooking, a trick of corral work and generally tended camp. From dawn to dark we other three smacked the lambs — herded.

It was a weary, gruesome enough sentence. We could have no dogs with the young lambs. But I often led my old white Crow about over the range with me; and at least all this had lifted one out of the noise and dust, the coil and utter beastliness, of the crowded lower pens. Shearing was now under full way down there too, which made things, if possible, worse. But up here at the head of the coulée we moved in a bright, clean, still fragrant spring world. Or, that is, it would have been still fragrant if you could ever completely wash the greasy smell of sheep from your nostrils, which you could not.

Ten empty days passed. Then, one evening, absolutely without prelude, a new note filled the air.

We had a bench, so-called, running across the entire outside front of our shack. It was a single unplanned plank, twelve inches wide; but much rubbing of sheepy overalls had worn it smooth, and you could, at a pinch, stretch yourself sidewise full-length along it. This night I was merely sitting, to the right of the doorway, lolled back as well as I could against the round logs of the shack-wall, my stomach distended with strong food, smoking a pipe, fairly comfortable and serene. At the extreme far end of the bench to

the left of the doorway, young Doerck and the grizzled man so happily dubbed Whiskey had drawn away together and were huskily murmuring. I paid no attention at all to them.

Perhaps I ought to say that, from the very outset, we four marooned ones, in an effort to avoid the oppressive intimacy of camp life, had instinctively paired off. Scaramouch and I held together, as against Flynn and the hulking boy. But to-night my mate had not yet finished cleaning up after supper. So I smoked my pipe on our side of the bench alone.

Suddenly, from across the doorway there, my inattentive ears picked up a word.

"It's a girl, I tell you!" insisted Doerck. "You bloody old red-eye fool! Don't you reckon I can savvy a girl?"

What was that? Intrigue, eh!

In his fit of snarling vehemence, though — yes, the boy had blurted the thing quite out. I couldn't but hear, involuntarily. Whiskey Flynn hissed sharp and crafty at Doerck, glanced warningly over his shoulder across in my direction. Then their tones dropped low again. I was consciously listening now. But in a moment or two they got up and moved off.

Somehow, I found I could not fall back into my digestive lethargy. My curiosity was piqued. A woman? Out here? On the range? Impossible! "A girl — savvy." It had now been so long since I had seen a woman that I wondered if I could be altogether certain of "savvying" one, if I were so incredibly lucky as to come upon her. . . . But — pshaw! On this wild edge of Pinto Basin!

I can assure you I had a moment of vivid fierce home-

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sickness, desire of the city. I had come to love New York. It was spring back there too. Ah, for a walk about through some familiar square — in the park. Just at this precise hour of the evening; in the soft, mysterious, clinging May dusk; among the first stars, pallid and remote; with girls and boys whispering and laughing together everywhere, eyes hovering close above eyes! Perhaps, even, if I chanced not to be working that night — perhaps I might even have the hand of a spirited gay girl in my own arm! And here, now — Montana — this womanless alkali desert — a hundred and twenty miles from the nearest railroad!

A dribble of helpless weak tears stung my eyes. Then I smoked hard, took a brace. But, after all — “It’s a girl, I tell you!” Yes, I had heard it. Distinctly, unmistakably — just that — “It’s a girl, I tell you!”

If there *should* happen to be a woman somewhere out here! . . . What sort of woman? Fancy, a really feminine creature — being pawed over in the minds of that pair, there, on the end of the bench!

For Whiskey and young Doerck had now come back to their old place. They seemed to me to be guarded, waiting.

Presently Scaramouch ambled out from the shack, wiping his wet hands on his new yellow sour-dough overalls. When he had lighted his pipe, I proposed — “Let’s stroll up as far as the spring for a bucket of water.”

“Sure!” he agreed, in his hearty, broad, Swedish voice.

The corners of one’s lips twitched to see and hear

him. Swedish — true! Yet this same blondly exotic old-world person, I should rush to explain, was nothing if not a good American. American? Well, *rath-er!* Even American born, by the margin of a week or so. Connecticut, that had been. Later he had gone a couple of terms to a country school in up-state New York. School — sure! Read and write, he could. As to a man's career proper — that he had entered on, at about thirteen or fourteen, in the Pennsylvania woods. From there, then, job by job, he had gradually worked his way west; till now, at sober thirty-five, he was contentedly earning his forty dollars a month and keep as cook and generally handy man on the Swallowfork ranch.

On my suggestion to-night, he promptly got out a galvanized bucket and dipper from the shack, and we walked up together to the drinking spring, which was fenced off with barb-wire from the polluting sheep. Idly we lingered on there a few minutes, smoking.

"I thought I just now heard Doerck and Whiskey discussing a girl," I casually mentioned. "There's no girl anywhere up around here, of course?"

Scaramouch started. I thrust my face close. Through the fast-gathering dark that seemed to be welling up out of the very ground, I plainly saw him chew at the long points of his massive, drooping sandy mustache — shake his big head.

"There isn't, is there?" I persisted.

He began to mutter. "O mister! No! So they've smelled her out already, then, have they? By jiminy! That's bad, mister. Yah! That's bad."

"Then there *is* a girl?" I exclaimed.

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He went on chewing his antique walrus mustache-ends, muttering—"By jiminy, I don't know what to do about that. No, sir, by jiminy, I *don't!*"

I tried to pin him down. "Do about what?"

A profound comic sigh tore his lumpy frame. "Soon everybody will be onto it—everybody on the whole dam' place. They'll get her. Yes, sir, they'll get her, mister. Or else they'll drive her away."

The one alternative seemed about as awful to him as the other. It was really comic. Still, I did not laugh. Rather, I took him by the shoulder, almost forced him to sit down on the ground with me. "Forced," however, is scarcely the word, either. Though he was so squat and lopsided, he weighed some hundred and eighty iron-hard pounds, was as intractable and strong as a young shorthorn bull.

"You don't trust me," I reproached him.

Again he sighed and shook the big square head, though not, I understood, specifically at me. "She's over here—maybe five miles."

I cried—"Eh? What's that? Five miles? From this camp?"

"Dressed as—" He didn't want to tell. "Dressed as a boy." Then, when it was out, he nodded solemnly. "Yes, a real nice little girl, mister. Only five miles away. Living over here in a gulch with her father."

"Well, what the deuce are you making all this row about?" I said. "Living with her father? That's all right, then, isn't it? Could she be living with anybody better? Could she be in better hands? Can't he look out for her?"

"The old man," mournfully returned Scaramouch,

"is loco. It's the little girl that's trying to look out for *him*."

Five miles away! Dressed as a boy! That accounted for all the argument about the "savvying." And Scaramouch so struck, too! But perhaps that didn't signify, especially. Still, it was queer. The blood began to pound a little in my neck.

"Go ahead," I pressed. "Don't stop. Tell me what you know."

"I don't know anything." He was ordinarily the cheerfulest grinning beggar in the world, which, of course, made his present gloom only the more imposing. "I just saw her, that's all."

"Not to speak to?"

"Yes, I spoke to her. Sure, I spoke to her. But I never let on I spotted she was a girl."

This business nettled, would not be gainsaid. "Well, how was it?" I all but shouted. "When and where? Come along with the romantic details." My nerves were always thin, childish, excitable.

He turned his ludicrously somber eyes on me — they were a pale greenish-blue in color. "You remember that afternoon I borrowed your pony and Rafe's gun to go out and get an antelope?"

"Just about a week ago?"

"I saw her that afternoon. It was then. That was the time."

The staunch tow-headed old Injun! Never making a whisper! As near at hand as that — all these days. And one not to dream! . . .

I simply settled back, camped down, drove Scaramouch to begin at the beginning.

"It was that afternoon," he muttered, at first unwillingly, then gradually warming to the reflective pleasure of the narration. "I found my bunch of antelope easy. I crawled up on 'em, and picked out a young buck, and let fly. He went down, all right — kerflop! The rest of the bunch h'isted their flags and scooted. So I went back to where I'd left your pony. But when I came riding up for my buck — ha, ha — he fooled me, by jiminy! He jumped onto his feet and lit out like thunder. Like a streak, he did — the blame young devil! I followed along on your white pony. The buck was bleeding plenty — every once in a while he'd have to lay down again. So I knew I had him. But he made for the timber. It was that big rocky gulch he headed for — I guess you ain't been there — Castle Gulch, they call it. Rocks piled up on top of each other, like warehouses and old ratty churches. 'Way up there the buck laid down, dead-beat, and let me sneak in close. I plugged him — whang! — between the eyes. When I shot, the little girl peeped out of the timber."

"Oho! The timber, eh?"

"I didn't know it was a girl," declared Scaramouch. "Not then. I thought it was only some lightweight kid of a boy. I pointed and made signs — offered her some of the meat. She wouldn't trail along down anywheres near for a good long while. But she wanted meat — for her father. So, before I got through skinning the carcass, and cutting it up, she did come down, a little at a time. She was just like an antelope herself. Corduroy pants she had on, clean and gray, and a big never-flop Stetson that covered up her black hair, and a kind of a long blue coat. Purty — O Lord —

purty as a picture! Her father was sick, she told me. I carried up half the buck to their shack, in a fine green corral of a park hid away among the trees."

The Swede liar! He had explained to us at camp that he had given half of that antelope away to some boys he had met out on the hills from the home-ranch.

"It's an old shack, though," he now heavily went on. "Not much good. The little girl — she tried to fix it up as well as she could. But she didn't know how. It's blame near falling down — ten years old, I guess — prospectors, maybe, or loggers. I wanted to go back the worst way and tighten it up for 'em. But I was afraid it might rattle the little girl."

"And you saw the father?"

"I saw him — sure. She said he was sick. But —" Scaramouch touched one stubby forefinger to his brow. "Loco, mister. Plumb loco — that old man. Nice — not bad, not wild. But just clean loco. He was circling around the shack with some bugs and ants and things pinned onto a piece of board. He talked foolish — foolish but nice, you know. I bet you he's got a bang-up education — that old man. I showed the girl how to roast the meat. They're nice people — nice — quiet, and all that."

"But — but! —" I kept blindly interjecting. "I don't understand. What are they doing there? How do they live?"

"I don't know any more, mister. The little girl said her father was sick. That's all I know. She thanked me for the meat. Oh, the nicest, purtiest little girl, you bet you! I'd sure like to go back and fix up the old son-of-a-gun of a shack for 'em. But I'd be afraid — I'd be afraid it might scare off the little

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girl, maybe." He thumped his broad knee. "By God, I hope they don't chase her away!"

"Didn't she tell you their name, or anything?"

"No, she didn't say anything about any name. But she was glad to get the meat — for her father. All she's got to shoot with is a shiny little .22."

My mind abruptly switched from him. I thought I had heard a suspicious sound out over toward the right edge of the coulée.

"Let's strike back to camp," I said.

Scaramouch, always amenable, took up the bucket of water, and we moved briskly down to the cabin. Neither Whiskey Flynn nor young Rafe Doerck seemed anywhere about, when we got there. We made a quick round of the corrals and all possible nearby loafing-places. Not a sign. I looked for Doerck's rifle in the shack. So — nowhere to be found!

At that we spurted out to the bit of natural meadow where I had picketed old Crow for the night. Gone!

It was his loping hoof-beats, then, I had heard thudding over the dark eastward rim of the coulée.

CHAPTER THIRD

CASTLE GULCH BY NIGHT

For an instant Scaramouch and I stood peering at each other through the black. This careless and assured commandeering of my horse — it did something to me. Swiftly I overhauled the whole Swallowfork situation with respect to myself. I had been going my own way, tending strictly to my own business, among these herder roustabouts and outcasts. No doubt it was something like the kind of conduct Scaramouch would have styled, in those favorite approving terms of his, “nice,” “quiet.”

But equally no doubt Flynn and Doerck had had other words for it, less to the fancy. These interesting virile citizens evidently thought me a milksop. They thought they could take liberties.

Also, very likely, they thought Scaramouch a fool. He was too easy-going, too smooth-tempered. That sodden Whiskey Flynn and eighteen-year-old Rafe Doerck were, of course, only the most moderately intelligent observers. And they did not dream Scaramouch had seen his adored “little girl.” I could hear the squat yellow-haired cook breathing hard now, in the forty-five or so packed seconds we stood confronting each other out there by the deserted picket-pin. He was snorting, really; just like the close-coupled, deep-

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brisketed bay shorthorn bull he so often reminded me of.

Those immediate snorts were as plain to the average grasp as words.

"But you haven't got any gun," I objected.

"Yah!" he spat. (Excitement always brought out the underlying Swede in him.) "Yah! Gun? I don't *want* any gun! A club—that's all I want. *That* pair of bums! Skunks, mister. Polecats!"

It seemed to me that skunks were precisely the stripe of game you rather needed firearms for. I had only a little Smith and Wesson pocket revolver myself; a laughable nicked toy, in western eyes; .32 caliber. As to Scaramouch—the most peaceful, unheroic flap-jack-tosser in the world—he could muster absolutely not a thing! Against us, young Doerck carried his Winchester repeating rifle; and Whiskey Flynn never made a move without the big blue Colt's .44 in the scabbard on his hip.

But now—my placid bovine whistler of a camp-mate! I scarcely recognized him. That wicked glint of pale eye, the fiery breathing! He was as good as a regiment with machine gun.

I said, banally—"It's your idea, then, to take a hand in all this?"

He stooped for answer and grabbed up old Crow's loose picket-rope off the ground, untied it from the steel pin and began feverishly to coil as he broke for the shack. "Just wait. Wait till I get a hatchet."

But I dashed alongside. "You're sure you can lead the way over in the dark?"

He grunted proudly, like a great plainsman, continuing to coil up the dragging rope as he careered.

I felt perversely moved to obstruct, to caution. "Better not despise our herder friends quite so much, do you think?"

"Yah! Bums! Skunks! If they hurt her, I'll — I'll —" I didn't conceive the modest yellow meat-block of a man could be so topky.

"All the same, remember, they've got the guns, a horse and a bit of a start."

"I'll show 'em. You stick to me, mister. We'll fool up their gizzards a whole dam' lot, if they go trying anything. By jiminy, we will! Yah! I'll show 'em."

Well! We couldn't, first and last, have lost above a minute or two. It was now close upon nine o'clock. The sheep, snug and settled in the corrals, were dead safe for the night. I had my little revolver on me; though, unluckily, I had shot away all but three of my cartridges for it at a badger this afternoon. Scaramouch caught up a hatchet from the wood-pile. In his years in the log-camps, he had become an astonishing adept with the hatchet and axe: he could throw them in a fashion that would have made the old-time Shawano with his tomahawk look abashed and silly, I've an idea. Out here on the range he was always practicing up against our shack-wall.

So armed, then — hatchet, rope and pop-gun — we launched forth together across the eastward slope of gully.

Now and again, in my mild traffickings with Nature, I have had occasion to note how much better night eyes we moderns own than we ordinarily suspect. Man, as a matter of fact, is still a pretty fair predatory and foraging animal, when he likes. My stumpy lopsided Montana Swede boy was neither predatory nor forag-

ing, to be sure. Jove, though — not to mention the nocturnal eye — with what a rush did he carry me over the broken ground! My legs must have been near a foot the longer, yet he all but walked me (or ran me, rather) to a flat standstill.

A lovely late May night it was, moonless but marvelously ample and full-starred, with a kind of mysteriously suffused general night illumination — night clarity — which just fell short, somehow, of being actual light. The serene stars seemed their true millions of miles away. Lower down, though, the giant tonic spirit of the Rockies brooded over everything like a wing. Fast as Scaramouch took me, I could not help picking up innumerable little bye-delights, trifles of the sense. One was very much alive. Pilgrimwise, of course, I gave no thought to studying the trail. What did one have a guide for?

In 1884, even radical people in the Far West walked only under the harshest compulsion. I daresay Scaramouch and I hung up something very like a Montana record for our distance that interesting spring night. My poor lusty pace-maker, champion of distressed ladies — the riot that was going on in his clean heart!

For me, as I remember, I simply tingled all over with a generic human excitement. I don't think my mind dwelt really particularly on that more or less conventionalized romantic "little girl," haunting a certain wild landscape in her blue coat, never-flop Stetson hat and gray corduroys. It was not any special woman. The whole note of Woman had somehow just suddenly chimed on the Swallowfork air. And in a twinkling, practically — we four outliers — ay, one reason with another, here we all were — the cheerful assorted quar-

tette of us — all racing hotfoot for that enchanted Castle Gulch!

Rage stirred me, too. I kept milling over the indignity to my old Crow. I perfectly well understood that, as an Injun pony, he had probably often enough staggered along under the load of a fat nomad buck, a fatter sleepy squaw and half a dozen naked greasy brats. Which was all in the Upsaroka game. This was not. The mental picture of loutish Whiskey Flynn and the boy Doerck perched up there together on that sturdy short back, belaboring the old white fellow and cursing and pounding him across the hills at a hard lope! . . . It made one see red. *Was* I a milksop? *Would* I resent nothing?

We struck the wide lower reaches of the big rocky gulch, and swung up into it at a trot. The Swallow-fork had a summer sheep camp tucked in among the willows and aspens at the extreme mouth of this gulch, but no band had yet been sent up to it for the season. I was to spend the summer there myself, as it turned out. However, I could descry neither cabin nor corrals in the shadow to-night. As we drew near the real timber, Scaramouch, far from slackening his pace, quickened it. There were no hoofbeats anywhere up ahead of us. Not once had we heard that reassuring sound in the long five miles.

The walls of the gulch narrowed in sharp, at a point, and our cool overhead glimmer of stars all but went out. Then we were among the solid trees. I had not been in this mountain timber before. Evergreen it was, chiefly, very black and still. But the piny night smell — how unutterably keen and delicious!

Scaramouch charged silently on, a strange impres-



sive admixture of gnome, Viking and foot-Indian. Presently our ears caught a slight shiver and sigh, our stretched eyes made out a pallid spot beside the trail. It was old Crow. The roustabouts had ridden him up bareback, with only a hackamore at the head. I ran my hand lightly over him. Already the strong rank sweat had begun to cake and dry on his white pelt. We pushed past, grinding our teeth, keyed to the tiptoe.

If we had needed any spur, the yell that now came ricochetting down the mountainside would have supplied it. A man's yell, it was; and it betokened pain and chagrin. Scaramouch leaped ahead through the dense trees. Jove, how prodigious black! Then, far off among the tangled boughs, trunks and down timber, we picked up the faint ruddy glow of a camp-fire.

A park — "fine green corral of a park" — so Scaramouch had roughly described the girl's haunt to me. Of course one could not expect the good Swede boy to rave like a minor poet. But this — well, I can assure you — it was a little fairy jewel of a place, a nook of bosky dreams! Naturally, I got only the most blurred and chaotic glimpse of it all that first night. Yet I saw enough. The grassy open space was nearly circular in shape, with the dilapidated log hut standing fair in the middle of it. On the ground before the shack-door burned the newly plenished fire that had led us up among the trees.


"Doorway," I should have said, not "door." Door to the house there was none. Instead, a sturdy young pine had been cut off and leaned up against the aperture from the outside. With its pyramid of branches still green and compactly covered with the plumes of

long soft needles, this young tree made a very reasonable shift at a kind of door-muffle, of door-protection. Behind it, in the flickering yellow play of the fire, a point of bright metal would now and then flash out in high relief. Behind that again, one could just suspect the shadowy lines of a human form. I halted and peered from among the encircling timber. It must be the girl guarding her citadel with the shiny .22 Scaramouch had spoken of.

What more instantly concerned us, however, were the positions of Flynn and Doerck. This subtle and interesting pair of sheep-camp raiders had obviously suffered a setback. They were both at the rear of the house, out of range of the doorway and in the relative dark. Did I mention the shack had only the one opening into it? — no window, or anything of the sort. There were some small chinks where the daubing had crumbled away from between the logs of the side-walls, but the back seemed pretty tight. And here, at that tight back-wall, had our charming camp-mates now laid their gallant attack!

Evidently they meant business, too. Flynn, for the moment, half-crouched on the ground, muttering and cursing, was tying up the calf of his leg with a rag that might once conceivably have been a handkerchief. Doerck, paying absolutely no attention to him, rifle in hand, busily gathered up chips, dry twigs, cones and so on, heaping them against the back logs of the house. Also Doerck kept a watchful eye on the situation at front.

Before we could get round to the edge of the clearing nearest them (we had to thread our way among the black trees mighty gingerly now), Flynn was standing



on his feet again, manifestly only triflingly hurt; and Doerck had mounded up a very decent bonfire-start of fine wood beside the shack-wall. Together, without a second's hesitation, the two ruffians began briskly to add on the heavy sticks to their kindling. For this they even took the girl's own camp wood, from a stock she had no doubt most laboriously dragged in on the upper side of the house. But you could make out that they were extremely careful to keep under cover the while.

When they had got their dry bonfire-pile built up to their liking, they both crawled low along the upper side-wall of the shack to the front.

CHAPTER FOURTH

THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

This should, by all odds, have been our time to rush. But we had had to move so slowly. We were not ready, not in alignment.

When Rafe Doerck reached the front of the cabin, he stretched out and grabbed a partly burned brand from the camp-fire, drawing no shot from the girl and retreating to the back of the house with his flare in safety. Flynn remained at the side in front. He was squatting on his heels, peeping round the corner at the tree-shrouded doorway, his big blued six-shooter in his hand.

"Now, then, you young she-devil!" he half-leered, half-snarled, at the silent doorway. "Are you a-coming out? Or are we going to have to burn you out?"

He waited. No sign or sound from the cabin.

"All right," said Whiskey. He used a primitive device. "We'll give you till I count ten. But you hear me, kid! You'd better come quick. And you'd better come peaceable too, if you know what's good for you. Don't you think that there little pea-shooter of yours is going to head anybody off." The miscreant cut loose a shot with his big .44 into the heart of the fire, scattering up flame and ashes like a volcano. "I'll have you covered with this, mind."

The terrifying shower of sparks flew off, the boom

of the Colt's reverberated far up between the narrow rocky jaws of the gulch. But from the cabin — no remotest hint of life.

"All right, I tell you!" bellowed Whiskey. "You've had fair warning. Handy with that torch back there, Rafe." He turned and spat out again at the doorway. "You'll wear boy's clothes, will you? — you pasty-faced young slut! You'll shoot me in the leg, hey? Well, we're going to get you — see! We're going to get you, by God, if we have to kill you for it! Ten, do you hear? Now, then. Ten!"

He began slowly to count.

At last Scaramouch and I were set for the charge. In the very innermost possible fringe of the encircling trees we hung, perhaps thirty feet from Flynn, forty from Doerck. As the grizzled sheep-herder dog raucously counted off his long seconds, and young Doerck fantastically waved the brand about his head, to keep it alight, Scaramouch whispered in my ear.

"I'll whang the gun out of Whiskey's hand," he said, "and go for Rafe. He won't be able to pull his Winchester on me in time. You tend to Whiskey with the little .32." He dropped the rope, his right hand with the hatchet in it swung back over his shoulder.

"Ten!" roared Flynn. "Fire her, boy!"

Scaramouch breathed to me — "Now!"

That hatchet! Thirty feet is a pretty husky throw for such a frail tool. And the light was none so good.


But the way that revolving edge and handle hurtled through the air! Whiskey had the big single-action Colt's outstretched before him, leveled though not cocked. Clack! Eric Ericson's lumber-jack hatchet struck it like a bolt of lightning, head on, just athwart

the cylinder. The gun whirled round at right angles, nearly against the front of the house, tearing itself out of Flynn's amazed grasp. Which wicked and unexpected shock must have hurt the old crook too, as well as surprised him! With a yell, he jerked the wrenched hand back in against himself, and rose to full height.

It seemed to me that Scaramouch's knotted gorilla arm had not completed its cast of the hatchet before he was following it out into the open at about the same speed. But it was for young Doerck he made — Doerck, stooped there with rifle and brand over the chip-pile; busy, evilly absorbed, in the bon-fire starting. Nickeled .32 in fist, I lunged for Whiskey Flynn.

I did not want to have to waste any of my precious three cartridges, if I could help it. But I was a tortoise at this storming game beside Scaramouch. Before I could get to Whiskey, the old blackguard had recovered enough to be groping about down in front of the cabin with his left hand for the gun. I slammed a bullet along the ground close under his fingers, and he jumped back. When he faced round, he was looking, at some six feet, square into the smoking tube of the little Smith and Wesson.

Scaramouch, meantime, had been scorching like a rocket for Doerck. At Whiskey's yell, of course, the boy had straightened with a bound from his fire-starting. He saw Scaramouch coming, wild-mustached, an enraged yellow bull-monkey! As Doerck lifted, the flaming torch was in his right hand, his rifle, clutched by the barrel, in his left. He was no numskull, and swiftly figured, as Scaramouch had already figured before him, that he would never be able to get the repeater worked round and pointed, the lever snapped back, in



time. Not to do any good! Still, a Winchester out of shooting action — it has other uses.

Dropping the flare, young Doerck gave both hands to his gun-barrel, swinging the stock well above his head. Quick as a greased streak he worked. So he was all primed and ready for Scaramouch, who had absolutely nothing, you understand, but his two naked fists.

Unfaltering, the yellow-overalled one dived in — a beautiful long tackle — coming like a thing out of a catapult. He nailed Doerck. Only, the descending butt of the Winchester caught him while he was in the air — an awful smashing thud. It could not check him, a hundred and eighty notched-up pounds, rocketing like that. Over and over the two of them tumbled on the ground together. But when they stopped rolling, Scaramouch lay quiet.

Doerck leaped to his feet, the rifle-barrel still clutched in both hands. Up into the air whirled the stock for another smash. I had already hopped far enough to the front, risking a shot from the girl, to have both thugs in something like a line. For one instant I took my eyes completely off Flynn, turned the little .32 loose at that hulking murderous young Rafe Doerck.

The try wasn't a hit. *Why* wasn't it? *Why*? Here, at the very beginning, I had this squinting Judas irremediably in my power, under such conditions that nobody would have dared blame me if I had snuffed out his poisonous life. Why didn't I? . . .

But I didn't. It must have been a near thing, though. The swish of the bullet froze the deadly boy in his tracks. The butt of the Winchester did not fall this second trip.

One cartridge, I had now. And my partner stretched

out on the ground there, cold! Fortunately, the kindling against the shack-wall had not taken fire.

"Drop that gun," I commanded Doerck. "Just from where it is — without lowering your hands."

For a breath he glared silently into the muzzle of the little nickeled six-shooter (it covered Flynn as well now), then slowly let the Winchester slip down through his fingers to the ground, his arms remaining raised above his head.

"Get your hands up," I said to Flynn.

He followed Doerck's suit, without lagging, without comment. I knew they had only the big Colt's and the Winchester between them, in the way of firearms. And both of these now lay on the ground. But I could not afford to chance a card.


"Step up here beside Whiskey," I next motioned to the boy.

Sulkily he did it. That opened a gap of some feet between him and his rifle.

"Shoulder to shoulder," I exacted. "Stand close. And keep facing me — both."

It is a tremendous fillip of a sensation, that — the looking down a gun-barrel into hostile and impotent eyes. I can understand how a certain type of man would be apt to over-indulge himself in the gayety of it. Whiskey and Doerck, of course, did not guess I had only the one cartridge in the world. A cartridge, as anybody knows, may always miss fire.

Like a circus acrobat on his tight-rope, I edged over a goodish arc of grass toward the fallen Winchester, seeing to it that my sheep-herders scrupulously honored me, as I shifted, with their full front. When I had got in the region of the rifle, I felt carefully about



over the ground for it with my feet. The smooth rounded gun-stock was not hard to locate. Then, eyes always bleakly along my saving nickeled tube, I gradually stooped and nipped the prize up. Ah, I can tell you — a loaded Winchester magazine — that went distinctly better!

Advancing on my pair of raiders again, I now drove them backward till they bumped into the shack-wall. Shoulder to shoulder thus, facing me, their arms uncomfortably high above their heads, their backs tight against the logs of the upper side of the cabin — that was to have them, unconditionally.

It was to have them — yes! But also it was like having anything else you did not want and did not know what to do with.

I racked my very amateur gunman brains. I admitted that I hadn't, perhaps, done so rottenly so far. Still, I was dealing only with sheep-herders. Besides, it had been ring-master Scaramouch — *he* had been the one to take all the chances. Poor stumpy beggar of a Volsung Scaramouch — lying stone-quiet, there, in the cool grass by the corner! I did not even dare steal a glance toward him.

Well, then, the girl. What of her? Could any little thing be hoped for in that quarter? She had not potted me with her .22 when I had exposed myself a few minutes ago at the front. Right now she could be shooting at us through the chinks in the side-wall, if she liked. Had she seen it was a rescue — understood?

Somehow, I did not have much confidence in her grasp. Nothing about her seemed very reasonable. . . . But that poor clubbed Scaramouch! One must *do* something!

In my gentlest voice, I called — "Miss."

No answer.


"Miss," I repeated — there was just nothing else for it. "Nobody will harm you now. But we've a man down outside here — the man who gave you the antelope meat the other day. You can help. I'm taking care of the two brutes who were bothering you. Could you bring some water, or have your father bring it?"

Silence for another long minute, dragging, interminable. Then, in the intense mountain quiet, I heard a body switch out past the pine-needles in the house doorway. After that — more silence. But now I was certain I could feel her cautiously peering round the log corner at us.

For some little space she must have eyed us so, all up and down. And still, not a word, not a breath! I flipped the side of my head over toward Scaramouch. Then I heard her push back past the pine-branches into the cabin again. When she came out this time, the pine-branches made a metallic sound, as against tin. But still she hesitated before venturing round the corner.

"He's a good man," I assured her. "Not like these wolves. Do what you can for him, please. But first — will you hand me that big blue revolver that's lying on the ground in front of the house?"

Very, very, gingerly she approached me with Whiskey's retrieved six-shooter. I took it from her at arm's-length, caught one quick glimpse of her from head to foot. She had her shiny little .22 rifle at the ready in her other hand, I saw. Most heartily I thanked her for the revolver. Still saying nothing, she



retreated to the front of the house again. But I now guessed it was for the water she had already brought out.

With Whiskey's redoubtable Colt's in my fingers, and the strange girl for ally — well, I began to look up a bit. I tried the .44 — cocked it — made sure Scaramouch's hatchet had not put it out of commission. Then I slipped my own desperate young weapon into my pocket.

All this heavy warrior shot-and-shell — fancy — a peaceful health-seeker, a mild Pittsburgh architectural draughtsman! I don't know whether I seemed most a walking arsenal to myself or a pawnshop window.

The rewarding point about the big-caliber gun, however, was that it let me back far enough off from the cabin to be able to include Scaramouch under my eye. So I could now at least half-watch the girl as she worked over him. She had only a small can of water. Always timidly, uncertainly — the snap ensemble of that park cabin-side must have been a rather queerish thing, in the fire-flicker — timidly, uncertainly, she sprinkled down a few drops of water into the Swede boy's partly turned face. He gave no sign. She sprinkled more, livelier. No response.

I began to be frightened in stark earnest. "Dash him well!" I cried. "Hard!"

She tipped her little bucket, splashed down all she had; a couple of pints or so. It was sufficient. It did the trick. Scaramouch gurgled, coughed, spat, sat up.

"Don't do that," he mumbled. "By jiminy!" Hazily he began to finger at the back of his head.

"What the thunder — I don't know — what is it — where am I? —"

"You're up in Castle Gulch," I said. "Doerck gave you a clout over the head with his Winchester." And then I added, with cunning — "The young lady, there, was good enough to come out of her cabin and revive you."

He climbed hastily to his feet, bowed and felt for his hat, which had, of course, gone in the mêlée. He looked sick and pale, and his big head was woefully swollen; an item that would not a lot improve his never precisely Hermes-like appearance. But anybody could see the fine able forthright fellow sticking out all over him.

"Don't you worry and run away, now, miss," he muttered dizzily. "Mr. Hainlen and me — we won't let nobody hurt you."

Then he promptly tumbled down again in a dead faint at the girl's feet.

CHAPTER FIFTH

DUNCANNON TRAGEDY

However, just to have seen him up on his short columns of legs — that was decidedly something. The spirit of this lovely little sylvan park flashed by me in her unspiritual gray corduroys, fetching more water from the shack. Under her continual drenchings, Scaramouch roused and a second time began to claw round to hoist himself up.

"Lie still, there!" I warned him. "Don't move. We'll get on without you."

The girl, you will remember, had not yet once spoken. She might be a mute, for all I personally knew. However, there was only the one plan.

I said to her — "We had a rope — we left it out there in the edge of the trees. You couldn't find it, I'm afraid. But holding this revolver on the crooks — just like this. Do you think you could? For half a minute, while I manage that rope?"

Then I heard her voice. She whispered, steadily enough — "I'll try."

"Splendid! I'll be keeping the Winchester on 'em too, from wherever I am. Are you ready?"

She drew up close beside me, and I transferred the cocked and pointed big Colt's from my hand into hers. After that, my first care, as with the six-shooter, was to test the Winchester out; to make sure the jolt on

Scaramouch's hard skull had not jammed any mechanism there. It worked all right, the lever pumped, the hammer clicked back, a cartridge snapped smoothly into the breech.

"Now for the rope," I declared blithely. I was actually beginning to enjoy myself a trifle again.

"Just you wait till the gang down at the sheds hears about this!" promised young Rafe Doerck, through clamped teeth, the first syllable that either of the surly vandals had ventured to pipe up.

I recall I stared intently at him; realized with a kind of start the infernal malice and fury of that youthful face. He was full six feet tall, weighed as much as Scaramouch, and had rather regular handsome dark features, except for his right eye, which showed a slight inward cast. He was a very good shot with a rifle, though the crossed right eye made him shoot from the left side.

"If either of them flutters a finger," I told the girl, "let fly, instantly, in self-defense. Hold on the middle of the chest — the stomach."

She nodded. With my own eye and the Winchester always fixedly on the herders, I backed off into the fringes of the clearing. I knew as good as exactly where we had launched our thrust from. A triangle of three little pine trees, jutting sleekly out into the grassy circle of the open, marked the spot. Soon one of my exploring feet was inside the coil of picket-rope. Hurriedly, without stooping, I dragged it forward on my toe that way to the cabin.

I had never tied up a man for keeps in my life, of course. I knew nothing whatever of ropes, knots. Still, I had that whole forty-five feet of three-eighths

inch lariat to go and come on, and I used it all. What I lacked in finesse, I made up in sheer bulk and quantity of hitches. So, notwithstanding my eastern tenderness, I fancy I trussed interloping Messrs. Flynn and Doerck into a passable shipshape. Outlandish pilgrim night! Taking the cartridge-belts and Whiskey's gun-holster from them, I then left my raider buckos stretched full-length, a sullen pair of logs, along the upper side-wall of the shack. After which, be sure, I breathed easier.

As I now relieved the girl of the big six-shooter, I had a rapid deep look into her face; rapid, yet frank and deep, I repeat; such a look as can grow only out of such dislocation and pressure of events, where incertitude and silence and suspense hang like a blur over everything; where peace, honor, very life itself, are at stake.

Poor helpless little masquerader, poor little tragicomic hider in the hills! How vilely true was all that of her! She must take nothing for granted — never good, clearly — in anybody. Ten minutes ago she had not dreamed I existed in the world. I, indeed — this dubious sheep-camp hand, this no-name skulker from among the trees! And now, in the night wilderness, virtually alone together! Man and woman — alone! That still grave look — that indescribable, questioning, eternally simple, eternally mysterious, look. On the far verges of the Pinto Basin — that original man-and-woman look! . . .

The camp-fire had begun to burn low, so I smartly set about building it up. Then, between the girl and me, we succeeded in lifting and hauling Scaramouch round to the front of the house, propping him up in a sitting position against the log-wall, his feet comforta-

oly spread out toward the fire, he violently protesting all the while, as you might safely bank.

"Hey, now, mister! Yah! I'm all right. Let me æ — let me do it by myself. By jiminy! Now, don't you, miss! You ain't near strong enough. Don't let her lug so, mister! I can walk, blame it, I tell you! Ain't you going to leave me walk? Much obliged — much obliged, miss. But by jiminy! —"

We bathed his battered head with more cold water. Doerck was a husky whale of a lad, the thwack with the gun-butt had been a daunting wallop. All this outside swelling, though — that reassured me. So long as Scaramouch kept reasonably quiet, he did mighty well. He could sit up, neat as you please. It was the trying to move about which dizzied him, toppled him over.

Soon things were very decently snug and easy with us. The fire, big and cheerful, made a yellow heart in the night. I had another glance at my roped crooks, then went down to the trickling icy rill at the bottom of the gulch for fresh water. When I came back, the girl still continued, to Scaramouch's inexpressible consternation and delight, to hover maternally over him, not able to do much, yet brimming with eager gratitude. I told her of the rattling fine fellow he was, how this impromptu trailer expedition up here to-night was all his doing. I told her a bit of the whole filthy case down at the lamb-camp and at the lower pens, and, almost before I knew it, rather a good deal about myself. I wanted to stand well with her — there was never an instant's doubt as to that. And then too, halting term by term, she began to volunteer small illuminating points about herself.

Make no mistake, I am not going to try to furnish

any architect's sketch of this girl, cryptic and mountain-cloistered, with her Helen charms. In the first place, I couldn't. Next, that sort of catalogue, besides being a bore, is absolutely never a hair of use. It reveals nothing.

No, a man's love comes to him in a million different ways. Mine, I say curtly and baldly, came to me out of the sky this May night in the fantastic little fire-lighted dream-park in Castle Gulch. From the moment I turned, with a hearty sighing breath, after having finished up on the last knot with Whiskey and the venomous Rafe Doerck — from the moment my eyes really met hers — really met and spoke to her, understand — from that moment, I was lost. Call it what you will — lost, found — conquest, surrender — any indefinable word will do. Fate! . . .

Well, then, that most ancient and flagrant of spring-time miasmas, that universal blanket stencil — Love.

Perhaps, under commoner circumstances, the germ might not have got the silly better of me. At home, in the tattle of the rum young architect's-office lot in New York, I enjoyed the reputation of being a mere grubber, insensible to women, sport; insensible to everything in life but my grind. I daresay I *was* selfish, absorbed. Probably it had needed this shock — the blow to my health, the strangely poignant, lonely, natural days in the foothills here — needed all this to make a soul in me. I don't attempt to explain. I merely state the instance.

A man gets a name for emotional unresponsiveness. More or less, he plays up to the label. And then, one pine-scented primitive night, a brief look into a girl's pallid scared face, and he is drunk with wonder and

imagination and desire — every individual clayey molecule in him set quivering and alight — not for an hour or a week or a month, but to the last disillusioned end — incurable, dependent, quenchless! How can one add to or take away from that? The most ancient and comic of vernal miasmas — ay. And the most terrible, and prime!

Thirty years ago — that first glimpse into an unknown woman's eyes! I was already, at the time, remember, a solid studious twenty-seven. I had a mother and sisters and plentiful fond, be-petticoated cousins. I was used to girls, not apt to be dazzled. I had inevitably seen some share of the more visible of metropolitan ladies. Here and there, since, I have blundered through a fairly large acquaintance of the sex.

But, before or later — never once, I swear, have I encountered anything like this same vivid and haunting quality in the world. Perhaps, at a single tap, I exhausted all recognition of it in myself. The brooding and impassioned modulation of childishness into maternity, the spiritual exaltation, the delicacy, the genuineness, the whole moving atmosphere of beauty! No, I may have gone the restless hungry way the half-gods rebel often must. But not in the field of love. There, always, for good or ill, a vision has traveled with me. I couldn't, if I would, shake it off. Was I, then or ever, such a quite gibbering ninny as to reckon my girl unique in the species? That could hardly be. Well! . . .

Why say more? I don't pretend to understand. One happens on things, it seems, or one does not. And in thirty involved unwearied years — to make nothing of those that went before — in a middling active and

various life, I have not again happened on anything even remotely like the star-hounded and divinely courageous young creature I found this faraway night in the steep of Castle Gulch. I don't offer the fact as being intrinsically valuable. To me, nevertheless, it is a fact, explicit, historical.

So! You won't for a minute think, though, by the bye, that that first night in the gulch was all magic, all rank intoxication. Rather — not! We had some pretty utilitarian issues to meet. Suddenly the complete absence of the girl's father struck me.

In answer to my hint, she hesitatingly nodded toward the cabin and said — "Yes, he's inside there. Lying down. Asleep."

"But!" I marveled. "Through all this row? And in your pinch — you never let yourself — turn to call on him? —"

"He's not well. He doesn't notice what goes on. He sleeps a great deal. He — he's had a bad nervous break."

Frankly I begged her to be more plain with me. Our progress had been so swift, so sure, our attraction so mutually instinctive. I felt I could, now.

"Oh, it's not easy," she murmured. "If only you'd known him — my poor father. He's so ill. You can't guess." There was no wail in her voice, but a note, passionate and caressing and subdued, stilly tragic; the resigned and despairing mother. How the echo of it kept sounding in my ears!

As unbrutally as I could, I let her perceive that Scaramouch had told me something. After a moment, she wrought herself up to speak. Low and ever-halting, she began, the sweet dark head downcast, her shiny

little target rifle yet loosely hanging in her left hand. "My father is a college professor. Or he was till last winter. If you've studied much mathematics — abstract mathematics — perhaps you've heard his name. James Duncannon."

I was absolutely bowled over! Heaven knows, I loathed engineering — my own foolish mathematics were scrub enough. But that name — the name of a really noble and aloof American scholar!

"Why — why —" I stammered helplessly. "His books — of course — his books! —"

She said — "Yes, he's written five books. That was his life — mathematics. That, and some other sciences — geology and botany and zoölogy — for recreation. Even now —" Quickly she had to cover up her eyes with her right hand.

"Ah, miss," mumbled Scaramouch, from below us on the ground. He must have been able to grasp next to nothing of it all. Little he needed of intellectual processes, though, to sense her pain. And notwithstanding his own rather considerable preoccupation with pain just then!

Huskily, I also tried to bolster her. "I see, I see. I know something about some brands of study — what it can do to one."

She took down her hand and went on. "As a family, we have always been the sport of tragedy. We're accustomed to it. But this — this is the worst. My poor father! He felt it — his trouble — he felt it coming a long while. He was afraid of it — did things to — to fight it off. He gave up his most cherished habits, his pleasures. Instead of reading scientific books, he read only the lightest stories, hundreds and

hundreds of them. Some kind of print he *had* to read. That's how he spent his evenings. The stories kept him from thinking, yet didn't tax his mind. He wouldn't read grown-up novels: the light ones were so cheap and mawkish and pretentious — they irritated him. Juveniles he liked best, boys' books of adventure. He'd read a whole one every evening. When the relatively good ones of that sort were all done, we had to get him whatever we could. The sensational paper-backed kind, I mean, that messenger-boys read."

There, I submit, was a picture for you! Professor James Duncannon of Johns Hopkins, one of the two or three pure mathematicians of his day, with half a dozen elaborate European university degrees behind him, sitting under his quiet savant's lamp, racing through the classic episodes of the Beadle Library — Deadwood Dick and the rest!

"I undertook to read some of the books to him," continued the girl. "But he liked better to read himself. The stories were often rude and inhuman, of course, full of horrors and heroics, with Indians and hair-breadth escapes on every page. Most of them were about the West. So gradually the West began to exert a queer fascination on my poor father. After a while he wouldn't read anything but western stories. We had to give him the same ones back over and over again. He didn't notice. For all the time now his — his trouble — was coming on. He grew more and more like a boy. He had to give up his lectures and his scientific societies. That was at the beginning of spring. By then his trouble had really come."

"As a family, we have always been the sport of tragedy. We're accustomed to it." That child, that


glorious Madonna-browed young creature! Her misery, burning, swallowed-down, made my own throat ache intolerably.

"Had you nobody to help you?" I couldn't forbear asking. "Pardon. But — no one close? —"

"My mother died from the effects of a railroad accident in Italy five years ago. That was the beginning with poor father. He nursed her, brought her home. They'd known each other since they were children, had neither of them ever thought of anybody else. The emptiness made father uneasy: he couldn't seem to adjust himself to the change. For the past five years we've lived alone together, just he and I. We're from Maine, but of course we had to live in Baltimore, where he had his fine liberal chair. There were plenty of friends, really. Only, this — it's so hard to talk about. We couldn't discuss it. And people were so nice. They understood.

"For father kept growing constantly worse, you see. One morning last month I went into his room to wake him. He wasn't there. He'd slipped out and run away, exactly like a boy in the books. I thought of the West at once. But we hunted about in Baltimore for two precious days, and advertised in other cities, and I hurried up to our little Maine farm, where he'd fitted a zoölogical laboratory and museum for himself. But it was all wasted time. I was nearly sure, from his interest in the adventure books, that he'd go West. In Chicago the police found a clew for me. And in St. Paul, another. Then I followed on out along the line of the new railroad.

"Finally I heard where he'd left the train, at a station called Billings. A freighter had taken him north



from there, in his freight-wagons. He has a wonderful faculty for making friends — my father. His students all adored him. I still followed on from Billings, as well as I could. Then, when I got to Piegan Springs, I met a shock. I was just too late. Father had gone deep into the mountains with a party of prospectors — off all roads — a party with mules and pack-saddles.

"Nobody in the town had any real idea where the prospectors were going. I couldn't follow any more. I gave up — oh, so heart-sick — gave up, made myself stay in that one place, waited for news. Father is such a good amateur geologist: I suppose that's why the prospectors wanted him along with them. They couldn't have guessed at first that he was so ill. But they were very honest, very considerate, with him. When they found he couldn't keep up, couldn't stand the hardship, they brought him down here to this cabin at the edge of the mountains, left him enough food and camp things to live on, and sent word back, by a passing cowboy, to Piegan Springs, where I was still waiting."

Fancy that ordeal of waiting, for her! But you would have to know the superb quiet passion of tenderness and devotion, to see it all — this passion in so sensitive a child, so sheltered, so delicate-nurtured!

"Then you rushed straight out here," I supplied. "Who took you, who guided you?"


"The hotel-keeper from Piegan Springs. An old man, chivalrous and kind. We did everything to try to persuade father to go back. But he'd come to like it here. So I told Mr. Glendenning I'd stay. He warned me against it. He said he wouldn't even dare to let it be known in Piegan Springs I was out here alone. He

frightened me about the men on your big sheep ranch, only ten or twelve miles away.

"But father didn't want to leave. He was contented here, and I couldn't bear to hurt him. As for deserting him, of course! . . . It was old Mr. Glendenning who advised me to — to dress like this, and not to go about any more than I could help. But I've had to show myself sometimes. That afternoon Mr. Ericson so generously gave me the fresh meat — I hadn't been able to shoot anything myself, then — for days! And father must have good nourishing food, you see.

"It was old Mr. Glendenning, too, who brought me up this little rifle for grouse and sagehens and rabbits; and every once a week or so he comes, by a roundabout way, with provisions for us. Each time he tries so hard to take us back down with him. But now, with me here, poor father seems almost happy — yes, perhaps quite happy. It would be cruel to uproot him. And I myself — helpless and bewildered as I was at first — I've been getting more accustomed to the life myself, day by day. I've never thought of it as dangerous, not actually dangerous. Not till to-night. I *did* think we were lost then. But everybody had been so nice to me before. And even to-night — see how you came and saved me."

I promise you, I had no man's heart left in me, my soul was dissolved and drenched in an unfathomable compassion for her. At the same time, I ground my teeth. I suspected everybody, that wily old coyote of a Piegan hotel-keeper with the rest! She was so white, so ingenuous — she would never dream. As for the unspeakable vermin-scum down there at the Swallow-fork home-ranch! . . .



"You must cut away out of here!" I exclaimed excitedly, tramping about the fire. "To-night, at once. Go in and wake your father. I'll help you get ready. You are to take my horse and break down to Rainbow — that's the nearest town. I'll travel as far as I can with you, to the road. Then I'll meet you in Rainbow again to-morrow, and arrange everything."

Slowly she shook the lustrous dark head. "You don't understand. Father's become very weak, very — very like a child. It's mortal with him — this. He grows feebler every day. If — if he lives through the summer —" One overpowering sob convulsed all the fine line of her slight, straight, young body. "No, to drag him away from his little moment of happiness now! It would be to kill him."

"But — but — you?" Impotently I found myself mouthing and chopping and stuttering at the unreason of the problem set up before me. "This storm, this threat, this — this! — Is there no possible way — to get *at* him — to open his eyes — to explain? —"

Again the dull slow shake, unimaginably simple and touching, of the downcast head. I caught hold of myself, stared long at her, then revolted with sudden fury against the hideous and stupid filth of Life.

"Ericson!" I shouted. "What! She shall stay!"

Scaramouch, you may remember, had asked for nothing better. But I went on ridiculously waving my arms and vociferating, very likely a bit overstrung, daft.

"She shall stay, by heaven! Right here — till she chooses to go! To the very last second, till the sky falls! Tragedy? What! Do they mean to say we can't take care of her? You and I? Law or no law!

Eh? You're able to sit tight there and pump a gun?"


The uproar of my own fatuous bawling must have cooled me. Tinhorn desperado! But Scaramouch — the lumpy Swede brick he was — did all this comic hooray offend him in the least? Not it! The sincere delighted grin, the relief, that gradually overspread his broad mug, still vague with the vertigo, still flushed and twisted with the acuteness of his pain!

"Yah, sure!" he grunted. "You bet you, mister. We'll fix 'em."

God! Before jumping into the urgent work of the night, I fed my eyes on the girl a moment longer. . . . Tragedy? . . .

The infinitely tiny crawling insects of oblivion we were, with the great silent bulk of the Rockies looming pitchy behind us, the great basin-like mysterious valleys lying dim in front. And overhead, faintly glimmering above the transient hand's-breadth of open in the tortuous cleft of immemorial stones — there the careless few stars. But to ourselves — to this woman and to me, and to the brave swaying fellow propped against the wall, and the sick man sleeping inside the hut, and the two sheep-herder dogs trussed off to the side — to us, the crawling blind insects, how marvelously central and important! . . .

Well, at least we fulfill our destinies. It was May, all but June. The fire of bleached pine-wood towered high, burning red and yellow and orange and amber; capricious, insatiable, living, joyous; a spell to every sense; flinging out fantastic wild shadows against the smooth conical surfaces of the surrounding trees; playing fantasies even more enigmatic and bizarre in the



blackier hollows between. The smell of the wood-smoke was in my tame citybred nostrils, the stir of the fight in my tame sedentary blood.

Almost whispering, I said to the girl —“ What’s your name? ”

“ Eloise.”

Another little space I lingered on beside her in the yellow fire-flicker, aware of the profound and stifling loneliness that would seize upon me the instant I had turned my eyes away. . . .

Flynn and Doerck! O dogs, vile lecherous animals! Them — to dare to dream — *them* — of possessing her — this white flower! I groaned, swung abruptly round the corner of the cabin, six-shooter in hand. Not dogs — rats! By the truth of heaven, they should know once for all! —

I stopped short, brought up with a snap in my unbelieving tracks. Whiskey and young Rafe Doerck were not there.

CHAPTER SIXTH

MORE OF THE NIGHT

After my great job of tying!

But no, it couldn't be. The shadows, the fire-waver, were tricking me. I stooped, dropped to my knees, groped over the strip of dark ground lying along the side of the shack. My hands strayed into a litter of loose rope, still knotted, cut into odds and ends, scraps. That was all. Old Crow's forty-five feet of three-eighths inch picket-rope — so much raw hemp — a wiry hash of ravelings!

Ay, Whiskey and the hulking boy were most certainly gone.

But when — how? I gnawed my lip. Had they been able to count on help from the outside, friends we did not guess of? Was it a crook rescue? Or had my noble pair just been neat enough to wriggle away out of my tyro hitches of themselves? And now! What next? Might we expect a rush — any minute? Or would the carrion wait till they had the whole Swallow-fork gang behind them?

Bah! After all, it was no such terrific catastrophe — this escape. Let the blackguards go! It was now *we* who had the guns. And at least one of the pair out there — honest Papa Flynn — by his own admission, that grubby red-nosed student of the chase seemed already, for his share in the proceedings, to have reaped a more or less busted leg. And a jarred hand, too!

They would be shyer next trip, maybe. To the deuce with 'em! So triumphant a night of nights!

Still, I must admit I had meant to manage this in a quite other fashion. I should have to twist and turn a bit, now.

Well, if I must — to it, then. But one thing at a time. And that was to say, first — old Crow. I should need him strong, the old white buzzard! For I had to be on hand at the home-ranch by daylight of the morning. My business was to see Dorgan, and to see him before the herders had had a chance at him. And so, old Crow — yes, sharp! If only Whiskey and Doerck had not got to him ahead of me.

Once before, to-night, I had been down to the bottom of the gulch for water. So I now began to know my way about here the barest trifle. Without waiting to pass a word to either the girl or Scaramouch, I slipped on round the back of the house and was off downward among the trees. In the gulch-bottom, this side of the icy little stream, wound a trail, narrow and overgrown and rough. My feet struck it, well above the point where we had earlier found Crow tied. Then — on down-gulch at a run!


Just in the very nick, I was. As I neared the spot, I heard Flynn hoarsely urging young Doerck to hurry. The boy seemed to be untying Crow's hackamore-rope from the tree, and having trouble with it; Whiskey evidently meanwhile clambering up into position on the old pony's back. You may suppose, though, that I didn't hold off to make scientific researches. By no means! Letting out a wild yell, I followed it along with a shot from the Colt's, burning the big .44 slug close above their scurvy heads. I had a feeling they would

never show the stomach for running this kind of gauntlet. And they did not. Deserting old Crow in a stampede, they ducked away into the cover of the inconceivably dark trail-side trees. The wise white pony stood my charge tranquilly, ears cocked, snorting once or twice for politeness, form's sake.

I didn't linger to congratulate myself on the rout at all: an ambushed club or rock would soon do the trick for one in this inky black. Grabbing Crow's loosened hackamore-rope, I hastily led him on back up the trail with me. When I could catch the faint high glow from our camp-fire, I started a gradual zigzag up the mountain-wall toward it; weaving and stumbling interminably in and out; trying to thread a silent foot-course among the tangle of dense trees, the huge edged stones, the tough clumps of low cedar, the villainous cruel impasses of down timber. I made the most awful mess of it, naturally — yet did somehow eventually land the two of us safe inside the conical hedge of pines of our grassy little park. You could never in the world have done it with a civilized horse. Luckily for me, old Crow was just a rough-neck Indian cayuse. . . .

Thirty sped years! Since then, for instance, I have read Anatole France. And what a delight to remember now that choice and special piece of ironic comment, somewhere in his lovely autobiographical stuff, in which he tells how, as a boy, he had decided on a career of deathless military glory for himself — a sort of nineteenth-century Joan of Arc! The only thing that barred him from his vision was the sordid lack of horse, arms and an enemy!

Well, at least Castle Gulch had fixed that part of a military career all right for me. The gulch had sup-



plied everything. And I began to rate myself as a rather stiffish stagger at a warrior, too! What ho, I had never been called on in one of these crises before! The sheep-herders would get to understand, presently — who they were up against. “Matt Hainlen, holy terror of the plains!” *There* would have been an absorbing young masterpiece for Doctor Duncannon!

Weird and silly exaggeration, of course. But I really did moon. Exploits should be my careless daily fare. I daresay some puerile fustian just went with the whole big new surge of life. It vanished simply enough with my first glimpse of the clearing again. For Castle Gulch had supplied me with infinitely more than arms and enemy. There, humbly and intently crouched behind her bonny camp-fire, all staring blue-black eyes for me — there was the impossible girl!

“O!” she breathed. “We’ve been so worried!”

The shot and yell, the missing crooks, my disappearance! And I think I have mentioned how things echoed, reverberated, in that rocky-throated gulch. But yet, the marvel of it — such welcome! James Duncannon’s daughter, a sheep-camp hand! . . .

I can recall having heard perfectly decent and respectable people assert that they did not fear loneliness. Perhaps it was a lie. Or perhaps . . . poor blindfold stodging wretches!

For me, be sure, I stayed beside my welcoming wide dark eyes that prodigy of a night till the very last minute. We didn’t wake the great man from his profound sleep inside the cabin. Outside, Scaramouch became more and more himself — grew securely better, hour by hour. Sitting, all three of us, warm and throbbing about the fire, we laid our plans.

Both Scaramouch and I should give up our lamb-smacking jobs at the ranch. We had money and to spare, among the lot of us; and Scaramouch was not up to working yet, anyway. He should just stick right here, be nursed by the girl and do guard duty. He made no objection to that, I ask you to believe. Mine, for the moment, was to be the active rôle. I must try to square ourselves with Dorgan at the sheds; buy fire-arms; collect our traps; and then hike back here as quickly as possible. Meantime, of course, we should hang religiously on to what guns we had.

The girl Eloise unmistakably did not want to see me ride down among the herders. She was by now thoroughly nervous, alarmed. And little wonder — wan harried child! For myself, with no present bravado fustian at all, I felt hardly a qualm of uneasiness in the enterprise. Almost certainly, I knew, we might expect more trouble up here. Wicked bad trouble, probably. This was out of Bull Dorgan's bailiwick: he couldn't very readily prevent it.

But from the lamb-camp in — Bull, with the shadow of Sheriff Tek Gaines behind him — no, he ranked an Old Testament despot at the home-ranch. He had a heavy hand; and the smackers and shearers down there were never the brand to work much out in the open. They would want to strike, if I half sized them up, from under cover — that, always. On the whole, with Scaramouch's rapid improvement, I stood by pretty confidently. Let the hatchet-thrower once pull completely round again, and — well, I had seen him under stress. One could conjecture from this something of what he was fundamentally like.

Before I set out, I replenished the wood-pile and

brought more water from the gulch-bottom rill; snow water, it must have been, from the snap of it. We boiled coffee over the jolly camp-fire. But none of us tried for any sleep. About two o'clock I made my start, leaving Scaramouch still sitting with his thick shoulders propped up against the front wall of the shack, the fire at his feet, Doerck's Winchester resting snug across his knees. All the vague tension of pain had now blessedly quitted his face, his broad hearty Swede grin was again fixed and normal.

I turned to the girl. About her slender corduroy hips drooped Whiskey's belt and holster, with the big blued .44 in it. We thought this advisable till I could get back. I prayed she might not have any occasion to use the brute of a cannon, but we gave her a lesson in shooting it off, and it looked cheerful and pictorial and imposing. She should have my little Smith and Wesson for her own soon. Meantime, I could still muster one cartridge for that redoubtable weapon. And I was sure I could borrow a gun from Dorgan, under the circumstances.

We parted simply, gayly. Perhaps the girl was not quite gay — not ever. "The sport of tragedy," she said. Later I was to come to know something of the deathless and mysterious passion of joy she had in her. Only a spirit rooted in the ultimate realities can tower to such joy. But "gayety" — no, that was never her word.

To-night she initiated me into a kind of path down the mountainside, so that patient and clever-footed old Crow had an easier scramble of it on the back route than when we had blundered up. The final picture I carried away of her charmed my eyes the night long. I


am an architect, I cannot insist too often; no writer. My gross and clumsy touch could never hope to make one suspect (let alone adequately *convey* to one!) how englamoured and appealing a thing she was, leaning shamefast there in her loose gray corded trousers, with the big belt and revolver sagging low on her right hip. Such feats are for the word-elect. I can but cherish my inarticulate picture.

Once not so long since, at dusk of a blazing summer evening down Third Avenue, I saw a Chinese girl wandering out alone in the street in her embroidered silken overalls — a slight, raving, tragic little beauty of child — who showed through the drugging heat just a trifle like that. Queer suggestive ghost of a memory! . . .

All the same, I have resolved that Doctor James Duncannon's daughter should have her dresses from Billings as quickly as we could get them. There was certainly now no point in this travesty of disguise.

That last shadowy flickering sketch of her, she bending, tender and wistful and aloof, in the outer edge of the magic firelight, I already a dozen steps sunk in the down-gulch pit of blackness! Then, the road.

Not that it was much of a road at first. However, Scaramouch had given me very racy and explicit bearings; and what with my old Crow besides — an old Crow at this juncture more or less solidly reënforced, too, with a lining of the park's wild grass — well, we made fairish head of it, from the jump. A few rods down the gulch-bottom trail I mounted; and thereafter took my usual attitude of trusting the whole expedition pretty generously to the canny white pony. Of the smackers I saw or heard nothing, neither in the five miles of range between the mountains and the lamb-camp, nor at the



camp itself. I had to stop at camp a moment to put on Crow's bridle and saddle, you understand. I am not a good enough horseman for the bareback to this day.

From the lamb-camp on down to the home-ranch I knew my p's and q's. It was comfortable riding the big stock-saddle, after the other ticklish razzle-dazzle; and no special need to push. Not the farthest hint of dawn yet paled the unseen line of notched and buttestrewn eastern horizon. But the piercing chill which presages dawn — soon that began to creep and clutch at me out of the dewless sweet air.

Not till I was within three-quarters of a mile of the ranch-house did I run into any sign of companionship by the way. You hear voices extraordinarily clearly and well on the dry range. I had let Crow down to his capital fast racking walk; so that my ears were not clouded by our own pounding; and I could pick up the pair of talkers before they got my padded hoofbeats. Nor did it ask any miraculous powers in an old campmate to swear to the identities of Messrs. Flynn and Doerck: such chaste tones were never to be hid under a bushel. But the condemned beggars had made most mighty good speed, it seemed to me — what with the perforated leg, and so on. I thought it my cue to jam along a bit livelier.

You could not tell just where the voices came from, in this chill blanket of night air. Ahead they must be, of course; and, as there was a well-marked wagon-trail here, the odds would be a thousand to one my brace of mangy buckos were grimly trudging along that. So I pressed Crow with my left knee, and we swerved off to the right at a lope. The voices died out instantly. I


didn't bother to swing very far off the trail. We had pared the raiders' claws down too close, I fancied.

The very first faintest tincture of light was now in the sky; not light precisely, but only, as you rose away from the ground, a graduated lessening of that densest, starless opacity which precedes the dawn. I couldn't see Whiskey and the boy. Yet they must have been able to distinguish the splotch I made, atop the white pony. For, as I loped briskly past a clump of high sagebrush, a thing whizzed out at me. It struck me too, a sharp glancing blow on the upper leg. Then it gouged wickedly off into the heavy leather skirt of the saddle.

Only one lonely cartridge I had, remember. And a telltale-colored horse, and a more elevated projection. I thought it better, all round, to get in to the ranch and have my talk with Dorgan.

So I did not draw rein. Nothing else happened. My trouser-leg was cut, I had a slight sting of pain. A trickle of warm blood even flowed. But that had dried up in a minute or two. The damage to me was a mere graze, hardly worth mentioning. Except as a renewed war symptom, perhaps.

The gash in my saddle-skirt I explored with reflective fingers. That interesting trenchant missile must have been Whiskey's big clasp-knife, very likely the same they had chopped themselves out of my gulch hitches with. A good smart Mexican throw it was too, the knife landing almost exactly point on. The herders had evidently been taking a leaf out of Scaramouch's book of parlor stunts with edged tools.



CHAPTER SEVENTH

A JAUNT TO RAINBOW

I found Bull Dorgan, shaggy and formidable-looking in the dawn pallor, filling the low ranch-house doorway. He was in his stocking feet, yawningly buttoning on his overalls. No comb or water seemed ever to have touched him in the wide world. I did not waste good time in prefaces, he wasted none in interruptions.

"So there's nobody left up there at camp to take out them ewes and lambs this morning, hey?"—this was, of course, his opening comment, no more sour, either, than just.

"Are you going to lend me a gun?" I countered. "Whiskey and young Doerck'll be here with their story inside of ten minutes."

He went back into the room and returned with a Colt's and a handful of cartridges. "I ain't got any scabbard or belt for this," he yawned. "Cache it away inside your clothes somewheres. But you won't need no gun here. I'll tend to that."

"Then it's all right about our quitting the lamb band?" I said gratefully.

Lambing had already begun to fall off by great leaps and bounds; a fact that stood us in excellent stead.

"Oh, I expect I can maybe chase a couple of men up," the ranch-boss admitted. "It'll be unhandy, but I can do it." He slouched sideways against the door-

post, considered a second. "See here. Let the Swede quit. What do *you* want to quit for?"

You might have thought I had explained myself sufficiently. But my reasons obviously had not impressed Bull.

"I just tell you what I'll do with you," he declared. "I'll give you a bunch of wethers to hold out in that summer camp up there at the mouth of Castle Gulch."

Bunch of wethers? Summer camp? Castle Gulch? The idea arrested me at once.

"That'll make you a first-class, bang-up law reason for sticking out there," Mr. Dorgan plausibly went on. "The Swede can stay with the folks in the timber. Your shack'll be less than half a mile away. Go on herding for the Swallowfork."

As a Swallowfork summer herder, no question, I should have an endlessly more influential rating with Bull and Tek Gaines. I was far from wishing to offend these potentates. Besides, if I did not take the camp at the mouth of the gulch, somebody else infallibly would. It was altogether too near for chance herder neighbors. Or, rather, for herder neighbors of whom there *was* no chance!

"Why do you want me?" I queried Dorgan.

"You're a good hand with sheep. You don't know nothing, but you're willing to learn. And you're careful."

That was flattery, I submit to anybody!

"And when will the wethers be ready?" I politely asked.

"As soon as they're sheared. The first band, that'll be. Three days, about."

Three days. "I'll take it," I agreed. But I left

myself loop-holes, in case anything should crop up at the park in the meantime.

Said the ranch-boss, confidently — "Nothing won't."

He went inside again for his hat and shoes. When he came out, I walked with him to the horse-corral. He furnished me with a fresh pony to ride to town on, treated me very handsomely. With that unwashed hairy foreman I have, on the whole, no quarrel to this day. He did what he could. And in settling me for the long summer in his sylvan foothill camp! . . .

That morning I crossed the tracks of never a Swallowfork herder. It was still very early. Flynn and Doerck, to be sure, must have been somewhere about the place by now; but I did not see them, and, as you may believe, did not bother to hunt them up. As soon as I had changed my saddle over, and had eaten a hurried bite at the cook-house, I set out for Rainbow.

It could not have been more than five o'clock when I got started, perhaps scant five. Rainbow lay twenty serene miles away. Twenty thousand, it seemed to me, that joyful spring morning! My new horse — a sullen, stocky, big-headed bay — carried me along over the ground easily enough. And you might have thought I had enough things in my head to keep me occupied. But did you ever try losing a solid nine-hours night of sleep out of an open-air life like this? And then punch sixty miles in the saddle next day? Try it some time, and see what happens. With a warm mild sun shining down on your head!

Jove, it was torture — that! My eyelids simply refused to answer to my will. I used every device, every subterfuge, every heroic spur, I knew. And in spite

of them all — there I would suddenly come to with my face squashed over forward in the bay's bristling mane, or else catch myself just as I was toppling out sideways from between the high horn and cantle. Terrible, it was!

Nevertheless, waking once in this dazed fashion, I stared to find myself on the edge of town. The sun still swung surprisingly low down in the blue eastern heaven. My sulky bay, though by no means old Crow, yet loomed out in the adventure as a first-rate cow-pony, able and independent. I put him up in a livery barn; had a hotel bath in a wash-bowl; ate and drank again; then dropped in at the best-stocked of the two Rainbow combination stores. They did not ask me any questions there (questions were all pretty much taboo in that latitude and longitude in the early simple times); but they must have given me a passing thought or so.

For the way I proceeded to wallow in ordnance and ammunition! An agent for a Mexican or Central American revolution would have been about the general idea. One '76 model Winchester; one double-barrel shotgun; two Colt's revolvers with belts and holsters; a belt and holster for my little .32; and about a hundred pounds of cartridges! Lashed together for carriage, it made a pack, I do assure you. And this, mind, not including Dorgan's ponderous loaded gun, "cached away in my clothes." Also I bought a flask of whiskey, and some odd personal trifles befitting to a gentleman — even to a greasy sheep-herder gentleman — proposing to himself to frequent a lady's company. . . . Poor bay cayuse, it was tough on him!

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Then the twenty slower, warmer, harder miles back to the ranch. I took galvanizing nips of the awful whiskey. I got off and walked. But I had to think all the while, too, of speed. Well, nothing lasts, of course, torture any more than the rest. In due sequence, we arrived in sight of the Swallowfork sheds. That waked me, you may gamble — effectually.

I pulled up at the side of the road, opened my pack and methodically set about reorganizing my military forces; mobilizing, as you might have called it. I got out the Winchester and loaded that to the barrel. I buckled one of the garish new belts, stuck full of blunted-nosed, bottle-necked cartridges, around myself; shoved one of the new Rainbow Colt's into the garish new holster. To hang *both* Colt's on me — an out-and-out two-gun man — no, for this I did not quite have the nerve! Though, as a matter of fact, Dorgan's emergency gun still sagged in my right-hand trousers' pocket, the little Smith and Wesson in my left. Lucky there was no place for me to fall in the water: I should have drowned, sure. When I had retied my diminished pack, I mounted and jogged into the ranch.

The sun by now said three o'clock. At the horse corral, where I went first to change back my saddle to old Crow, I bumped square into a party of six or eight men; shearers. They were moving, with their elementary B. C. tools, from one pen to another. Neither Whiskey nor young Rafe Doerck was with them; but anybody could see they knew the night's story. As I drew near, they stopped and eyed me. Then, taking in my glittering accouterments, they all began to grin. I climbed off the bay and freely returned the compliment.

"Yes," I stated, as genially as I could. "Everybody's entitled to a hell of a good laugh. Roll ahead. I'm with you. It amuses me."

"To laugh," tee-heed Old Man Gaspard, "— ah, de beeg bad sonnee! Dat ees de stuff. She teeckle de leevaire, hey — to laugh!"

"Then don't mind me," I agreed. "Tear the bridle right off. Have a smashing fine tickle."

"But say," asked a lumbering black-browed fellow, down on the ranch book as Jericho Smiles. "Listen! Has any Injuns busted out on the war-path, or anything that-a-way?"

I was uncinching the tired and sulky bay. "Sometimes bustling out 's in the air," I rejoined. "I'm too much of a pilgrim to risk a guess."

"That's whatever!" significantly threw in Mickey Devine, a crony, as I knew, of Flynn's.

An alcohol-soaked, gargoyle-faced creature, answering on the ranch to the nickname of "Judge," came close and touched my guns with the points of his fingers. He was one of those vile shyster lawyers, spewed out even by long-suffering western communities. "And can you shoot these here rough things off all by yourself?" he leered.

I shook myself away from the pollution of his filthy hands. "A little practice won't do me any harm."

"That's whatever!" significantly repeated Mickey Devine.

Just then Bull Dorgan hove in view, and the shearers loosely straggled off toward their pen. Bull also had a grin, of course, at my war footing. I gave him back his Colt's with hearty gratitude, and noted — a highly unusual detail in the routine of his own official appear-

ance — the glinting and businesslike six-shooter openly strapped on him. But I heedfully chewed in any impulse to comment.

"I'll ride up along to the lamb-camp with you," he vouchsafed. "Loomis and Rody and Hare-lip and Nigger Bill's there. I expect I'd maybe better spot what's going on."

He evidently had not remanded Flynn and Doerck to camp, then. Without being too much upset by the prospect of it, he was yet doing what he reasonably could to fend trouble off. Whiskey and the boy must be working somewhere in the sheds down here. All right. I told Bull I would deliver their Winchester and revolver at the lamb-camp to-morrow. He nodded. I made no further allusion to the sweet pair, and trusted un-spreadeagle Mr. Dorgan to volunteer nothing.

We rode side by side up to my late headquarters together; and I leave you to conclude if I would not be properly stimulated and charmed by this solid society. Hardly one single wink did I sleep by the way in the entire five miles! A man has to be a real person to hold down the Bull Dorgan jobs in the world.

At the camp, while he pushed on out to look up his stop-gap smackers, I got Scaramouch's traps and mine together. Heaven knows there was little enough, beyond our beds. I made everything into one big blanket-roll, which I then, not being a diamond-hitch artist, clumsily bound peddler-wise across the seat of my saddle. Nigger Bill Jackson, the new camp cook and handy man, showed no disposition to be of service to me, but grimly stalked away out of the shack. I rooted about on the shelves and found some cold beans and saleratus bread, however; and contrived a lunch.

After that, taking Crow by the bridle-reins, I once more started across the sage afoot for Castle Gulch. It was late, the long blue day soon began to close in. But I strained everything I had in me for a final spurt, and so reached the summer wether station among the aspens and willows by just a little after dark.

Well, there was my sixty range miles, riding and walking. Sixty-five or seventy, more like. Anyway, it seemed enough, as I flung myself down by the rill and drank deep of the icy water, and then stretched myself out full-length a minute or so on the beckoning ground. A minute or so on that celestial, dry, hard ground was my limit. I would have crawled the last rugged half-mile up to the mountain park to-night on hands and knees, if need be.

The shadows of the trees and buttressed rock scarpments made it too dark for me to be able to see much of my new camp. I did not try to go inside the shack; but merely dropped for another second on the inevitable outer bench by the door. Three times now I had passed along here, always in the night. I did not have the least notion of the physical look of the place. Yet I already felt a certain kind of attachment to it. I lay back, peaceful and content. Had one of those queer mad flashes of over-world prescience signaled down to me — "This is your home"?

I don't know. I don't pretend to know at all. It *was* my home. I have since built a goodish string of careful and expressive modern houses for other people, with at least two for myself. But in none of these (and I pleased myself hugely in each one of them) did my very heart and soul deign to light down as into that sheepy log hut at the mouth of Castle Gulch!

Perhaps I couldn't absolutely swear, as I repeat, that I had any real inkling of the case then, this night. Any prophetic inkling, I mean. I simply sat quite still; smoked a town cigarette; was not sleepy. To-morrow would be the first of June. An extraordinarily brilliant reddish-yellow star gleamed in the velvet sky. Reddish-yellow. How the colors of fireshine grew to obsess one! Color. If only one could paint! Why the devil couldn't I paint? . . .

From somewhere out of the night, a hesitating, intensely questioning voice breathed across the little vernal stirs of gulch air. "Is it you?"

I held hunched up against the shack-wall, giddy, stark. That murmur — who — what did it say? . . .

"Mr. Hainlen! Oh, speak! It's you?"

Shying away the cigarette, I leaped to my feet, probed the thick gulch darkness for her with racked and dilated eyes.

"Eloise!"

Without thought or premeditation, without an instant's pause, natural as the mere instinct of speech — Eloise — so, for the first, the dear startling name was on my lips!

And she? I heard her answering whispered "Ah-h-h," just a tiny childish sigh of happiness and relief, almost unconscious. Had she noticed my use of her intimate name? I doubt it. But she was glad — oh, yes! — glad to have me back. That grave white-faced New England girl, so sufficient and so strong! And yet, after all, so frightened and so lonely and so like a child.

"Where are you?" I cried.

She stepped forward out of the willows.

But this — she? The spirit of her park! It was no longer the shamefast figure in brutal and bifurcated corduroys. It was a woman — this — in a woman's rustling soft dress, with even a reminiscence of some charming delicate woman's scent upon her. And then — could I believe? . . . Gropingly she was reaching out her two hands towards me. Seeking me — with outstretched confessing hands! . . .

In order to understand the heights and depths of my emotion in all this, if you please, it is necessary to recall that there was probably not another woman within twenty-five miles of the spot. For four clear weeks, until here last night and in Rainbow again to-day, I had not so much as *seen* a woman. (And those others in Rainbow to-day — beside this rare girl!) But our sheer detachment — that was the point; our remoteness from the whole warm gregarious universe of love and lovers; our unique separation; our double exile. For me, I had been inhabiting a raw harsh frontier of life, peopled only with raw harsh men. And then, suddenly, a miracle — as if some pale young goddess had stooped to one out of the immortal Above! Stooped and caressed. . . .

A goddess? But no, better than that. It was Doctor James Duncannon's very human, tormented daughter — this; nineteen years old, a woman in a woman's fragrant dress. And gropingly she reached out her two hands through the dark toward me!

Awed and strangled, in a delirium of response, I cast myself down on my knees before her. The outstretched seeking hands I caught in my own; caught and drew them to me; and pressed and molded them in against my twitching face. I didn't once attempt to kiss the

hands. It had been only friendly need that drove her. Like a little lost child — friendly need. . . . Had it?

Divinely englamoured girl! Need, need? The soul has many needs. But here — anyway there was here something simple and imperious which did not beget kissing. To dare to press those narrow cool palms in against my cheeks and eyes — yes, that must be the wildest flight of my will. Tacitly I avowed it. Just the strange virgin touch of her girl's hands!

Nor did she hold back, resist. Our half-muted voices had created scarcely a ripple in the vast mountain-cup of night silence. Abruptly, to my unbounded surprise and shame, I discovered tears, stealthy hot tears, trickling through her fingers out upon mine.

Grotesque imbecile! Why should I weep?

CHAPTER EIGHTH

THE GULCH-DWELLERS

I don't know how long a time passed. But eventually I did contrive to speak.

"You came to meet me?"

She made a tiny motion of withdrawal, which I instantly allowed. The slender and delicate hands slipped away from me. Abashed, I rose from my knees. But she was not abashed.

"Yes," she said. "I was looking for you. I'm so glad you've come back — safe."

Then she told me. She had actually been watching out for me, ever since an hour before dark, from a high point of rock on the west side of the gulch. She thought she had seen a man, far off, leading a white horse. But I hadn't come up the gulch — not the whole way. Why hadn't I? She couldn't seem to understand that — why I hadn't come on up the gulch. And she couldn't seem to wait. It had been — such — ah, such suspense! So she had just finally shut her eyes to everything else, and run down here, to try to make sure! . . .

"Oh, dangerous, dangerous!" I cried.

But I didn't really think at all of the danger. I moved restlessly about and about her. I must have been half beside myself with delight. Such frankness, such tender candid admission! How could it be? Why,

twenty-four hours ago, I could never get over marveling, she did not so much as dream I existed in the world! And this — no coarse rough-and-ready wench — James Duncannon's cherished daughter — this exquisite and devoted girl! . . .

But so she was. That was ever the mark of her. Not one trace of timidity, of mean suspicion, self-consciousness. It was a bad thing for her; bad and adorable.

How I kept from damning myself that yeasty night, from snatching her up in my arms! . . . Somehow I did. And yet, why should I? Friendly need? This was no friendly need! Why vulgar shillyshallying between us? We both knew perfectly well we were for each other. Already the essential mating quality in us — our minds, our spirits — had they not already met together in the air? Ay, quite simply — met and joined! Still, I suppose there are automatic hide-bound observances. . . .

Home? Well, then, that ragged log sheep-camp among the Montana willows and aspens was my home. I explained to the girl I had taken it and the wether band for the summer. I explained to her why. I don't remember how she expressed her pleasure — she was certainly not one to be flightily demonstrative. But quick and sure I felt the proud satisfaction she had in my humble plan; felt it through a thousand intimate tingling filaments; felt it like wine in the brain.

Even with the soft feminineness of her dress, she was still wearing Whiskey's lumbering big Colt's on her hip. I asked her to give the whole beastly outfit to me. Then, opening my pack, I got out the small Rainbow belt and holster; filled the belt with cartridges; thrust

my shiny toy Smith and Wesson into the holster; and, touching all three pieces of the new guardian trinity to my lips, offered them to her. Obediently, she banded my first primitive gift about herself.

A vehement uncontrollable desire to see her face seized me. On the pretext of examining the cabin, I led her inside and struck match after match. Her skin had the kind of pallor which neither exposure nor fire-light could make red. Black hair — lustrous and black as obsidian — flung out the contrast. Not till I had dropped my eyes for a second to her gray traveling dress did her own eyes drop before me. Long blue eyes these were, yet so dark, and so heavily-lashed, that they too just failed of blackness.

Faintly flushing, she murmured a word of her clothes. Yes, she had several dresses here. It was only after she had decided to stay, to be sure, and on the urgent advice of good old Mr. Glendenning, that she had changed over to the corduroys. And it had been this white-bearded old dog also, of course, who had brought the trousers up. You may bank I was aching to put a crimp in the chivalrous attentions of good old Mr. Glendenning.

At last, as we were coming out of the shack, I remembered to ask about Scaramouch.

Mr. Ericson! O! How wicked of her — not to speak of him before! Her swift surge of contrition made me worship her. But he was ever so much better this afternoon — Mr. Ericson; almost quite well. And the fine friends he and her father had already become!

He treated the great downfallen doctor as carefully, watched over him as protectingly, as if he — her dear father — had been just a little baby. And yet always

tremendously admiring him, too — you could see that. I did not hesitate to tell her my brutal nickname for the bully squat fellow. Gravely she nodded, understood. He must be worried half crazy over her prolonged absence from camp now. Leaving Whiskey's gun outfit inside the shack, we launched on up the gulch.

To taste the full savor of plenty, naturally, you must first starve. All right, I was thoroughly equipped in that respect. I had never had any calf love, to speak of. And I was now to the mark of twenty-seven: I had been starving a fairish number of years. Sordid grinder, was my New York office reputation. Moldy grubber. Well, I *had* slaved. And then, here, of a sudden, to find myself threading the transcendent spring night; alone — alone in the primeval mountain wilderness with this girl; this inexplicable, impulsive young girl, neither child nor woman, lovely as a poet's fancy, strange as an imagined pagan sprite! . . .

Something beyond heavenly it was, something dizzying and indescribable and sheer. I wanted honestly to hurry, to relieve Scaramouch's bedeviled mind. I tried. But it was not in nature. I had no will of my own. We idled blissfully along; now deep in shadow; now out under the living stars; drawing up the magical piny elixir of the silent mountain-slopes into our thrilled nostrils; always trailing the quiet flea-bitten white pony, with his amorphous pack, half a dozen steps behind. Nevertheless, though our bodies moved so close, our hands did not again touch. And for that one night — no, I am not sorry to remember it so. Only, every word, every thought, was a caress.

Ludicrously overjoyed, Scaramouch capered about


our double return. Nothing could have been more genuine. Even last night, blind-sick and reeling and all — ah, I knew he had not missed the special sense in the air, the fate that kept tyrannously whipping me on toward his own-discovered “little girl.” He was no sodden slouch, bless him — no rank idiot. And now! Beyond the most ordinary human decencies, neither Eloise nor I made any show of playing the abstract, the coy. Never the slightest!

That first realization of our feeling must have cost the poor Swede boy at least one horrible pang. One! But grudgingness, pettishness, dog-in-the-mangerishness — pshaw, he did not guess the meaning of such games!

Except for a hunch of swelling still at the back of his head (it did not really count), he was now as ready and bull-like, as able, as ever he had been. And the beautiful grouse-stew he had simmering on the fire for us; two meaty big rock-grouse, cooked with rice; and a pot of coffee; and a slab of cornbread. For the fourth or fifth time that day, I plied a shameless knife and fork. Then — to lie back and smoke!

I should have said, though, that to-night Doctor Duncannon was of our party. Only, as Eloise had so wretchedly hinted, it is not easy to talk of him, or to write, even after thirty years. A tall stooped man, strikingly individual, heart-breakingly frail; with a soft mottled beard, and genius hands; a detached eye and a whimsical mouth — certainly you could never for an instant be mistaken in him — in the stamp of potential greatness. Nor as to why his students and his daughter idolized him. He was as simple and lovable as a gracious child. He must always have been so.

But tragedy — how it had singled him out, fastened



itself on him. No wonder the solemn white-faced girl spoke so bitterly. There, like a foul waiting bird — there the black promise hung perpetually over him. How, drop by drop, the poison had flowed — dim and horrid, an irreparable sly corrosion — into his every distinguished line. The dumb blasphemy! I pray heaven I may never have to confront another such wreck.

Over our otherwise ideal camp supper, he babbled genially. But he was by now so far sunk away out of all the common channels of humanity! It would never have occurred to him, for instance, to take a swallow of Scaramouch's masterpiece of a grouse-stew, if his poor daughter had not pressed the spoon literally up to his lips.

And so — no, of Doctor James Duncannon, by your leave, I sha'n't try to say too much. He was not offensive, understand, in any remotest degree. He was not even captious or petulant, as so sick a man might well have been. I never saw anybody go through the days so gleefully; so engrossed in the wraiths and glimmering illusions of what had once been a solid and commanding life, a powerful, eminent, deep-structured life. I swear it is not good to look too close at the débris of such a brain. You feel the foundations of everything begin to shake under you. From the first, therefore, I consciously avoided thinking of Duncannon. It was an effort, for you couldn't but be mighty fond of him. He had the rarest personal charm, the kind of thing of which no process of annihilation can take absolutely all.

This evening Eloise soon drew him away from the fire and mothered him to bed for the night. I don't

bother here to call my girl "Miss Duncannon," as you make out. I may awkwardly have addressed her that way a time or so, at the confused go-off. I am not sure. And it doesn't matter. Our sped liking burned rather too fast for most forms. But by the eternal smoldering twilight soul of mystery, such a daughter to her father! Filial duty, piety. Well! For me, I can only tell you, it is just not possible to put the passion, the brooding tenderness, the devotion, into words. *My* words, indeed! . . .

And all the while, too, I realized exactly how irrational the situation was. If these had been barren people, people without friends! . . . But they were not. James Duncannon's name is alive to this day, war or no war, in a dozen European countries. That incredible self-immolating girl in Castle Gulch had only to lift her little finger, and scores of the keenest and soundest that New England could lay claim to would have jumped to rally about her!

But she was not like that. No, for better or worse, there you have her. Too much pride, too much dignity, too much New England conservatism, perhaps you will say. State it as you please. I guessed the truth. She preferred to bear the sacred burden on her young heart alone.

I suppose each of us has met in his travels something or other which, in his fashion, he holds as the ultimate nobility of this extremely earth-flavored world. The girl in Castle Gulch is my instance. It was not merely that she was generous, willing to give herself up to death and desecration for her father's cracked whim. Scaramouch, right beside her, all but matched her there; had an almost equal generosity.

No. She gave with glory, with exultation — a silent and breathless rapture. . . .

Well, that night, when we had straightened up a bit after supper (each of the three of us lending a hand), we turned in for sleep. Eloise had a rude bed, across from her father's much better one, in a corner of the cabin. Scaramouch and I gratefully unrolled our blankets on the elemental baked ground beside the fire. One second after that, and I was lost — to love, fear, compassion, truculence — lost, to everything — drugged as by Nirvana itself in the divine mountain sleep!

Next morning we slipped promptly into the beginnings of a clear and orderly campaign. Scaramouch eyed his thick waist, enamoured in its giddy new Rainbow belt and trappings. Also, as he was to remain here at the park, where the shooting range would be short, he took the shotgun; a double-barrel ten-gauge, for which I had elaborately stocked up with BB and buckshot shells. I, at the wether camp, should have the Winchester. The Winchester and both Colt's used the same .44 cartridge, which simplified matters by so much. Our armament, however, divided thus among the three of us, did not seem nearly so overpoweringly big and complex as when I had packed the whole of it myself. Still, we each had a gun and a six-shooter, though Eloise's pretty little .22 target rifle mustn't be reckoned too seriously.

This was my first daylight glimpse of things here, remember. Believe, though, that the day glamour, if different, fell no whit below the night. Not a tree-shape in the borders of that little fairy mountain park — not a gray-and-green facet, not a shadow, not an

elfin cranny — could have been altered without loss. It was all impossibly gem-like, complete. And as for the ordeal of the sun on my pallid dark girl! . . .

One glistening vivid moment I lay thinking of her, when I had waked in the morning. But already Scaramouch was bestirring himself over the fire. I sprang up to help, gorgeously alive in every calling cell, every atom, of my renewed being. And then, the brilliant flack and sting, the shattering diamond-drops, of that snowy rill water!

After the breakfast the Swede put me to work with him tightening up the ramshackle cabin. He made a capital fist at this sort of woodland job. What vitality! The smash on his tough crown he had practically forgot all about by now. And the rude axman's skill! You could presently begin to perceive that old prospectors' shack turning into a real house before your eyes. Eloise went off with her father in his daily delighted wanderings over the mountain. For it was the queer twisted instinct of the naturalist, or the biologist, which seemed to survive in him after everything else had gone.

One small but significant detail Scaramouch and I attended to in the cabin during their absence. I mean the opening of unobtrusive gun loop-holes in the three blank walls.

CHAPTER NINTH

WAITING DAYS

Early in the afternoon I set out on Crow for the lamb-camp, to return Doerck's Winchester and to look about for an antelope, perhaps. At the gulch-mouth I stopped in at the wether station, to pick up Whiskey's belt and six-shooter. But I searched the empty cabin among the willows, there, in vain. Again and again I raked foolishly over every inch of space in the dusty bare room. Whiskey's gun was certainly not where I had left it. Somebody, you did not have to be a Monsieur Dupin to guess, had been up here and taken it away.

That little revelation gave me a start. We were under surveillance, then — all the time. A thousand to one the gun-taker had been up scouting about our very park. While we calmly slept beside the dead fire last night, no doubt! Thoughtfully I held on down to the lamb-camp.

There Nigger Bill Jackson was busy with a batch of sour-dough biscuits for supper. So he could not very well turn his back on me and stalk away out of the shack this trip. I went to put Doerck's rifle up on its regular pegs in the wall, only to find two other guns already in the place. I stood the Winchester simply in a corner, therefore, hanging the canvas cartridge-belt across the top of it.

"Who got Whiskey's six-shooter last night?" I carelessly mentioned to Nigger Bill.

He was one of those wicked, surly, wolfish mulattoes, bad through and through. Not a whisper of an answer did he make me.

"Who got the six-shooter?" I demanded, trifling with the lever of my own Winchester.

"I don't know nothing about no blasted six-shooter. Get out! What do *I* know about any dod-rotted six-shooter? This ain't your camp, is it? Don't come in here a-pestering me, will you? I'm baking bread. I don't know nothing about nothing."

To be ostracized by a cut-throat nigger! There seemed no reasonable way round that hardship. And the other smackers would be as hostile. I was a rank traitor to the camaraderie of the outfit; a spoil-sport. I had thrown my "mates." It was unheard of, but I had done it. I didn't even pretend not to be guilty.

Well, keeping under cover from that yellow nigger as much as I could (anybody could see he was the born assassin), I rode off and scoured the coulées along the mountain for antelope. Before long I had the good luck to christen my new rifle on a fat young buck. I am no hunter, I want emphatically to declare. I have always loathed killing. But we had now four mouths to feed at the park.

All the while, as I rode, my mind incessantly revolved about a question. Would Eloise be at the wether shack to-night? I didn't wish to meet her — not with this gory carcass. So I steered a high course, far up along the foot of the mountains, entering the gulch out of sight of the Swallowfork cabin among the willows. She wasn't at the park when I arrived there. Hurriedly

I flung my buck to Scaramouch, washed and raced down the gulch afoot.

On the bench outside the hut among the low trees, at my fateful home place, exactly where I had sat dreaming of her under the stars last night — yes, so it was to be! That perpetual triumphant miracle of Youth, on this savage frontier, reworking itself ever one tremulous time more! Swift dusk had already fallen in the gulch, but the great valley outside undulated away in subtle, rarefied, silvering light. This should always be our hour. Ay! And after to-night. . . .

Next day Mr. Miles Glendenning from Piegan Springs put in appearance at the gulch. I discovered him before he had got to the park, stopped his light spring-wagon and had a chill-eyed talk with him. I am bound to admit I was absolutely mistaken in the man. I knew it right off the bat, though I probably would not have owned up then. But he later proved himself to even my churlish satisfaction. Of course, it was by no means clever of me to suspect the old chap. I might have credited Eloise with a surer instinct. These mellow helpful Bonifaces, though — I happen to have dealt with them a bit, professionally, behind the scenes. And my whirl of the Swallowfork so far, recollect, had impressed me none too insistently with the vaunted western knightliness toward women.

Old Glendenning, however — he did make me blush. He had a disguised wagonful of good grub under a tarpaulin; special things, delicacies in cans, and so on. We sat down to a smart gypsy feast of it for dinner that evening, I can promise you. Glendenning stayed the night too, sleeping behind our new outer shelter.

For in the morning Scaramouch and I had built up a strong breast-high barricade of poles and logs, running across the entire front of the shack; screening the doorway and with space enough between it and the cabin-wall for us to be able to spread our blankets. If there were herders prowling about out there among the trees at night — well, at least we should spare them the temptation of a pot-shot.

As a bare item of guerilla sense, our exposed sleep by the fire could not but be a temptation to such shift and weak-headed fry. How they had ever come to pass us over that once was the riddle.

For any attack up here now, understand, would not be directed primarily against the girl. She had dropped into the background, really; the second line. The whole united ranch would never, in cold blood, stand for a mere lickerish animal hunt like this. They weren't quite so bad as that, in a body. Scaramouch and I, though — the turn-coats, the renegades — we more than took her place. Men had been tied — camp-mates; shamed; their faces dragged through the dirt. That insult to the sacred fraternal spirit of the ranch must be wiped out. You could feel the pledge of it smoldering in the sheepy air all about you.

The day after Glendenning's arrival, my wether band was to be ready at the lower ranch. I had told Dorgan I would be down at the pens by ten o'clock, and I left the park in plenty of time. Eloise had walked as far as the glorified willow cabin with me. (I should scarcely be back for our dusk-hour to-night, or somebody might be with me. So my girl came now.) I brought my bed-roll down along now too; for in the future I should have to sleep here with my sheep.

Glendenning had offered to lend a hand with her father at the park, and Eloise was going to spend the long morning tidying up my tree-embowered summer home — *our* tree-embowered summer home. Dim-eyed I rode away from her, my temples pounding, my heart suffocated, with something of her own deathless exaltation lightening in my more earthy soul.

At the home-ranch I ran into no unusual ripple of excitement. I always wore my big six-shooter strapped on me now, but did not to-day carry the rifle. Dorgan took me in charge at once, kept me strictly by him. Whiskey and young Rafe Doerck I saw and heard only at a distance. I enquired if they had both got their guns back all right, and vaguely gleaned that they had. By noon my last wether was shorn.

I ate dinner with Bull in the cook-house, then he helped me start my band off up through the sage and lupine for Castle Gulch. Let it here be said that I am not much going into the history of that episode of my herding. There were an endless million small vicissitudes in it, of course; but they don't count. One thing, though — I must never omit Magsie. For from now on she was to be an indispensable part of our gulch family.

A gentle young collie bitch Magsie was, of a washed-out black-and-tan color, with a broad face and affectionate liquid eyes. I had first made friends with her while smacking down at the lower pens. Now I begged Bull for her for my own, practically refused to take over the army of new-clipped wethers without her. Don't, in perdition's name, picture my clever Magsie to yourself as one of the collies you see benched at modern kennel clubs. She was a real dog; a worker,

your true homely shepherd breed; no brainless, bad-tempered collection of bonbon show points. She would never have penetrated into a judging ring in life. But she had the kind of sweet points that endeared her to you when you found yourself with three thousand frightened, senseless, bleating sheep strung out ahead of you on the illimitable summer range.

Though in whelp now, Jove, how she worked that band! It was like a great artist, not one motion too many. Bull soon decided he could quit us and turn back. Just before he spurred away on his heavy roan, though, he let fall a luminous word.

"I calculate you savvy," he said, chewing reflectively at his brindle beard — "I calculate you savvy that you and the Swede ain't exactly no star favorites in my outfit, at this present writing?"

His summer herder nodded appreciatively and attentively to that, you may gamble!

Bull went on. "I pick up a sign now and then. And I stand to head anything off, of course: that's where these here wethers come in. But—" He paused, scowling and twisting at his unlovely beard. "I'm going to drop a lot of men about the twentieth of the month."

"I see. And you think that then? —"

"Exactly. You folks up there at the gulch better have your eyes skinned plumb wide open, about then."

Which was all. He prodded his roan with the rowels and loped off. I stared after him. Even when you *did* expect it — a nice introduction, that, to one's career as herder on the idyllic summer range! Magsie came trotting up to me, her long tongue red and dripping, her beautiful intelligent eyes enquiringly a-sparkle.

For the rest of the afternoon I wove diligently back and forth with her behind my bawling band.

But, with the loneliness and all, you may imagine if this curt warning would not sink in. By the twentieth of June both lambing and shearing would be pretty well over on the Swallowfork. The big floating crew would then have to be cut loose. "Eyes skinned plumb wide open." Yes, the stark and complicated potentialities of that date, the summer solstice — oh, charming — undoubtedly, I saw!

At least it was gay to have Bull on our side — if he *was* on our side. My anxious solemnness of mien damped even poor Magsie, though she would always come up merrily enough again the next trip. Extraordinary how keen a thing a good stock dog is. I would simply forget myself sometimes, watching, admiring, her.

When we were about three-quarters way up to the mountains, Mickey Devine drove by, far off to the left, carefully clear of speaking distance. Dorgan had notified me that he — Mickey — would be along, carrying a camp outfit and supplies for my cabin. Though I knew Eloise could not be at the willows now, I nevertheless squirmed all over. Magsie barked at Devine, in his distant camp-tender's wagon. This pleased me. For my place at the mouth of the gulch must serve as a very real sort of outpost, sentry-box, to the park. By late evening I had corralled. Eloise and her father, Scaramouch and Glendenning, came down to meet me.

But no, as I say, I shall not bother with many of the sheep-herder details. Amongst us, we thoroughly established our new routine in the double-camp life between timber and summer range. Everything went

on swimmingly; except with Doctor Duncannon, of course, who failed a little day by day. Eloise and I were always discussing him. She perfectly understood his state, though. What we measured coming to pass here was precisely what the crack eastern physicians had told her must come to pass anywhere. Truly you could detect the mortal lesion in the man's fine countenance. All we could hope to do for him would be to make his end easy, happy; to let him go on to the last in his rambles, childish and gleeful, over the great jagged mountain; to keep him out of some beastly home sanatorium, or even worse institution.

So more than two weeks dragged by, weighted with suspense. The twentieth of the month rolled round. A cruel spun-out day that twentieth was to Scaramouch and me, be sure. I held my wethers close in along the edges of the gulch, from dawn to dark. Nothing happened. I slept (in cat naps) at the park that night. Still—nothing. Had the crooks not been able to organize themselves, get up their sheepherder nerve? I began to breathe something like normally.

In the afternoon of the twenty-first, Glendenning arrived from Piegan Springs on another of his periodic and beneficent visits. He brought along his usual stock of food staples and delicacies, with more ammunition and Eloise's large English luggage-bag from Billings. The weapon he always carried in the wagon with him amused me. It was a sufficiently commonplace double-barrel breech-loading shotgun, except that it had the barrel sawed short off, to perhaps half the original length. It looked bulldog-like, impressive. But I had never heard of such stripe of blunderbuss before.

This summer solstice night we had a grand civilized feast. There was even a bottle of wine. Eloise put on a fresh dress out of her just-arrived Billings bag. We drank half a dozen brave healths, sipping the rawish sherry from whiskey glasses Glendenning had provided from his hotel bar. Nobody mentioned the safe passage of the twentieth in the toasts. However, I can testify that at least one member of the party bethought himself of the occasion, very devoutly, in the privacy of his own heart.

About nine-thirty or so I started down-gulch on Crow for my camp, Magsie trotting cheerfully alongside. The little unaccustomed nips of sherry had set up a delicious glow in me. Be optimistic, man! In the comfort of partial reaction from those straining past weeks of guard duty. . . . Still, I did have the sense not to be too blooming cocksure of anything.

It was a windy, cloudy night; damp, fairly. And one has to have been there to know the joy damp weather brings to the dry high-altitude west. You relax divinely.

Well, down I rode; quiet, warm, content. We had got as far along the trail — Crow and the dog and I — as the turn round a certain jutting, sharp-sided point of rocks. We passed the turn. Suddenly, out ten feet ahead of me, Magsie put a furious barking. I twisted Crow back as only a cow-pony (or an especially hard polo pony, perhaps) can twist; jammed for the shelter of the rocks. I gave Crow a hint of what was wanted, that is. He did the rest. We made the cover right and tight enough. But as we scampered round the protecting angle — Jove, the hail of lead that spattered against the rock-wall behind us!

CHAPTER TENTH

THE GRAND CONCERT

A drunken roar filled the air, the gulch shook under the cannonading hoofs of a stampede of horses. Like mad they came; straight on, blind on! My gorge rose. The filthy scum! To have to make themselves crazy with rum this way. But that finally pictured them to you.

And it accounted for everything else too; for the thirty-six hours delay. They had been to town. All — I saw it all, in one instant, violently, as by the splintering light of a bludgeon-crack on the skull. If you did not see things in such a shower of brain-sparks then, as a matter of fact, you did not see them. Of natural light in the gulch-bottom there was next to none. Eyes simply didn't signify, in that cloudy ink-gut. Remembrance and instinct were what you had to go on.

Wildly yelling, pounding, shooting — on the scaly devils drove! I could not hope to hold any such alcohol-fantee mob. And in the dark, above all! It was folly to think of it. If I blazed away back now, I would be sure to kill somebody. I didn't want to have to murder a man. I absolutely did not. Yet, once let a couple of the hoodlums get past me, beat me up the gulch, head me off! . . .

All this as in the one club-illuminated second, under-

stand. I called to Magsie. I jerked my heels into Crow with a savageness that brought a grunt of surprise out of the staid old white beggar.

Lucky he now knew the ragged trail so by heart. For it was in *his* remembrance and instinct, obviously (not in my own), that I must trust. A thin broken line of willows, aspens and cottonwoods marked the track of the little mountain stream the whole length of the open gulch-bottom. It made cover, added blackness. Crow, gathered up into a stringy bounding knot under me, flew — did just literally hit the high places. As the sheep-herders rounded the rock-wall, they cut loose another random fusillade after me. Guess-work it could only be, of course; and drunken guess-work. The three of us — Magsie, Crow and I — slipped into the big pitchy shroud of evergreen timber with ease. Behind us, full-cry, the pack came hammering on.


What to do with Crow — there was the rub! If they found him, the vandals would certainly riddle him, in pure malice. Glendenning's two town horses were safely hobbled out on the acre of wire-grass down close to my willow camp. Glendenning! You may believe I put up a blurred little prayer of thanks to the sky for *his* presence at the park that night. It might be a trifle hard on him, I admitted — his being there. But for us! . . . Besides his extra gun, you see, the old lad was a person of some consequence in the county. His word would carry weight. Not with the crazy drunks, naturally. If it should ever come to an "afterwards," though. . . .

But my white pony? Well, I must take a chance. On the left slope of the mountain, across from our park, towered one of those picturesque and forbidding

“castles” which had given the gulch its name; a huge craggy mass of sandstone, with a particularly neat triangular cubbyhole scooped out of the upper side of it. An ingenious little fifteen-foot rock corral this cubbyhole made. It had a narrow tree-screened entrance at the point of the triangle, and was utterly hidden till you all but stood inside it. Eloise, exploring once with her father, had stumbled on it, or spied it out, rather, from above. I thought of the bit of precious time I should have to squander in getting there. But the herders — yes, they would certainly have it in for old Crow.

I had been inhabiting this gulch now for above three weeks, remember. And with the daily explorer Eloise for my guide. More or less, I had learned the place like the heart of one’s hand. The wooded region immediately about our park, at least.

And to-night — hi, the way I shinned poor old Crow up that left mountain-wall! Going by the rankest faith, it was. Faith, truly — or some intangible thing. We bumped sharp into our impregnably looming “castle” all tidy, though. I dragged Crow in through the gate-screen of cubbyhole pines, and flung the bridle-reins over his head, which is the cow-pony hint to stick right there till you are come back for, if it’s a week. Then, Magsie and I — down we lunged again, across the brook, across the trail, up our path on the opposite side. Magsie behaved in the pinch like one of your great sagacious fiction detectives. Though we could plainly hear the crooks blundering and crashing about, a few hundred yards below, at the entrance to the timber, she never let out a peep. We made the park, hands down, with minutes to spare.



Perhaps you may fancy that Eloise, Scaramouch and Glendenning would miss the noise of the pretty row-down gulch? Not likely! When I had climbed now to within some fifty steps of the park, I piped up with the whistle we always used for signal among ourselves. Instantly my girl came darting and swaying down the path, poised a breath to make sure of me, shudderingly cast herself into my arms.

"O!" she sobbed. "The age! It was terrible!"

I half-carried her back up into camp. It was our public betrothal. Hereafter there should never be question of concealment with us. She it was, they told me, who, not knowing of the special menace of the twentieth, had yet caught the first sound of trouble below in the gulch. How those long blue-black eyes swept over me, when I had loosed her in the firelight! The fathomless woman principle, in so naïve a child! And Scaramouch, too. He was impossible, that hybrid troll of Volsung-Nibelung. How genuinely he welcomed me to the safe harbor, with a proud guffawing clout on the shoulder that crumpled me up like a leaf against the corner of the house! But my face must have thrown them into a fright.

Well, we cleared decks for action in jumps, I ask you to believe. Scaramouch dashed into the shack for buckets.

"Hey, I got to sneak down to the run for water," he said.

We tried to dissuade him. But he would only grin and cry—"Yah!" We *might* need water, one thing with another. It was the fire, though, that gravelled me. How were we going to keep it up for light? I piled it high now, with logs, and then chucked all the

available rest of our wood inside the new front cabin stockade. From there we might be able to shy it out, a piece or so at a time, on the blaze.

Scaramouch arrived up the path with his two buckets of water, puffing, apoplectic, in great boisterous saga spirits. But the herders were by now close behind him. With a farewell punch at the fire, we all ducked snug away under shelter of the cabin roof and walls. An hour and more ago Doctor Duncannon had fallen heavily asleep on his pine-bough bed on the floor. The bed was fortunately in a forward corner of the room, out of range of the doorway. We built traps up about it, did not otherwise disturb him.

I forgot to say how really handsomely our Piegan guest showed in this crux. An old southern fighting man, as it seemed, Glendenning blossomed out under the heat of battle now like a magnolia in the sun, his puckered gray eyes blinking steelily, his thin-bearded jaw on the snap. Once I crawled through the cabin doorway to where he was crouched behind the outer barricade. Our shack faced south. From that quarter the crooks were riotously approaching up the mountain-side.

"Come on, then, you lousy whelps of woman-hounds, come on!" I heard Glendenning mutter. "That's right, by God — come a-running! I ain't never demeaned myself by killing no sheep-herder yet. But everything goes wide open here to-night, you're a-whooping, just as she lays!"

I think I have already hinted that my pilgrim mind somehow revolted at this idea of coldly shooting down drunken men.

"Are we absolutely bound to go as far as the kill-

ing?" I put to Glendenning now. "Couldn't we merely discourage 'em, cripple 'em, rake 'em in the legs?"

The old lad flapped the penthouse of his bushy white eyebrows at me in disgust.

"If you spot anybody trying to break across that ghost-line of firelight out there," he said, "I advise you not to sashay up and down too long, hunting for his legs." He fiercely patted the short-barreled blunderbuss. "Nine buckshot, about belly-high, is my motto."

Scaramouch, meantime, had also found occasion to slide out to us. He picked up the tail of Glendenning's amiable discourse, wriggling and beaming with sympathetic delight.

"Oh, yah, sure, mister!" he tittered. "I got buckshot, too. Belly-high — yah, yah, yah — oh, sure thing!"

"Discourage 'em. . . . rake 'em in the legs!" testily sniffed old Miles Glendenning.

It did not need letters in the sky to point out to me that I was in a strategy-board minority here. Eloise's pallid face appeared in the house doorway, and, to make her draw back, I had to creep in.

We waited, very still. The Swallowfork raiders came smashing through the dry timber like a troop of stampeded elephants. They were raising all this outlandish racket on their own broganned feet too (as you could easily enough surmise), having left their ponies well below them, there, in the bottom. Some faint semblance of human reason they seemed to gain as they came on. Perhaps the exertion was beginning to chase the red-eye fumes out of their feeble brains.

At any rate, before they got to the edge of the park, they had distinctly quieted down.

Suddenly, a flash — zip — a crackle, and the cabin room was alive with lead. Spitting, singing, thudding — a devil's ladleful, I would swear to anybody!

Recollect, the shack had no door. And our breast-work outside ran up only some four and a half feet. But the doorway itself could not have been more than five and a half feet high. In order to pour as many bullets as that through as narrow an opening, the miscreants must therefore somehow have climbed into the air; got on top of rocks; lodged themselves, even, in the branches of trees. They couldn't be so positively crazy-horse drunk. Underfoot, the packed earth of the cabin floor was ripped up in a dozen aligned places, heaven knows how many slugs had jolted into the lower logs of the back-wall. Good none of us had been in the way!

With the rattle of Winchesters, a splitting triumphant yell also resounded. From behind our bully stockade, the four barrels of our ten-gauges roared back. It was like a little scene — a little fulminating red-streaked night-piece — out of the mud of Flanders.

Inside, Doctor Duncannon started up on his bed with a cry.

"Lie down beside him," I pressed Eloise. "Coax him, soothe him, take him in your arms. Hold him by force, if necessary. That will be your hard part."

Her face, in the stark moment of final realization! The white humbleness! . . . Poor dismayed child, poor outraged child! She was too mightily intelligent, you

see, too candid, too honest. She sensed just as well as any of us that the few months, weeks, of trivial play at the end of her father's shattered life — let him be as distinguished a man of science as he may — that it was not worth this chance to the rest of us.

If she had been alone with him again, as on the other night three weeks ago — that would have been their own affair. But to be dragging us, her generous new friends— dragging *us* in and in to the loathsome brutish net. Poor tormented child! For, observe, she would get no thrill of bold adventure out of all this. To her delicacy, it was simply unspeakable soilure, dirt. I stroked her, whispered the fondest words I knew, thrust her toward the doctor. It would be safest so — for her!

"You must keep him flat down on the bed," I insisted. "Lie with him yourself. A bullet might drift in between the logs."

"I'll do as you tell me," she said submissively.

With a spring of relief, I hopped to the loop-hole in the east side-wall: I had been neglecting this matter much too long already. At almost the same instant, Scaramouch came scrambling in on hands and knees through the doorway, not lingering any, I assure you. He drew another yapping rain of slugs after him, one just grazing his last heel. Outside the fresh logs on the fire, catching strong, flared up like a Pittsburgh converter.

The Swede boy's first lightning glance about the shack was for Eloise. Seeing her perfectly all right in the corner, embracing her father's thin shoulders, caressing and stilling him, cook grinned, satisfied. He was amazingly Scandinavian to look at this evening,

with his exultant dull red face and huge bristling mustaches. You did not seem to think of him by the name Scaramouch. Having contented himself as to Eloise, the grin on his comic cartoon features expanded and fructified, to me, into speech.

"Just you wait!" he grunted. "We'll fix 'em for that, all plenty. We'll show the sons-of-guns of skunks — hey, Matt?" He had got as far lately as calling me Matt. "My second barrel, by jiminy — maybe I winged one of 'em, right off the hook."

"Winged? Who? Are you sure?"

From the side, very carefully, he was letting down the canvas flap over the doorway. "No, I ain't dead sure. Wish I was." His thick voice professed indifference, only his squinting eyes and broad flushed cheeks betrayed his artless charm in the exploit.

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, just after I banged that lick, I spotted them three young pines out there shaking like thunder — that's all. As if maybe somebody was flopping around a whole lot inside."

The dropped canvas made the room quite dark; but you could therefore see even better through the loop-holes. Scaramouch took the west side-wall. Glendenning remained outside. The crooks slammed loose a few times at the curtain, perforating it, as it swung, with jagged vertical slits. But we were never in range. Occasionally we did catch a peep through the back loop-holes, covering up as well as we could the while, and not hanging on there, in the ticklish positions, too long at a trip.

Once I turned in the dark to Eloise. "You've got your father lying down flat?"

"Yes," she murmured. And then — "Don't think of us. Unless I can be of help."

In one breath Scaramouch and I commanded her — "You're not to move."

A stretch of endless-seeming unbroken pause ensued. For twenty minutes, not a shot, not a yell. The shabby beasts among the trees were evidently trying some kind of suspense game. Our fire outside began to crumble to embers, the yellow light unmistakably to fade down. On his bed Doctor Duncannon, groaning slightly, fell again into the profound pathologic sleep. Eloise rose softly up and joined us at the loop-holes. Even Mag-sie, feeling the black strain of quiet, uneasily whined a little from her sack in the corner. Glendenning slipped in from the barricade for consultation. Not a bullet now saluted his lively wiggle through the dark doorway.

Well, we simply must have light — there could be no two guesses as to that. The sheep-herder rats would sneak in, have the cabin ablaze in a jiffy. With a secret sign of encouragement to Eloise, I dived under the door-flap, unmolested, for my turn outside.

The entrance to that saving inspiration of a stockade, I should say, was formed by having the two halves of the front wall set at different angles, overlapping several feet in the middle. But the opening so made faced to the west, away from the fire. Grabbing up pieces of my stored wood, I began to heave them, without exposing myself too much, over the top of the barricade toward the dying glow. Some landed in the embers and caught. I got the range, after a few bungling tries, and managed to start up the flames again, pretty brisk.

From the herders, meantime, to check me — not the phantom of a crack! Minutes ticked on into half-hours. It was destroying, uncanny.

If you want a good waiter, of course (I don't mean a servant), never dig up the artist. And I was even worse then than most. I am not speaking now of tall matters; imagination. Nerves will do. It had indeed been as much nerves as anything else which had driven me out here, in the first place.

All the same, this protracted Indian stripe of maneuver might have begun to pull on husky nerves, after a while. For me, anyway — no mistake — I was getting regularly worked up, regularly wild-eyed and champing on the bit. I told myself that Scaramouch had certainly downed one of the crooks; that this had sufficiently sobered them; that they had drawn off, cleared out.

But why, then, in the devil's name — why so supernaturally noiseless about it? That mess of alcohol-soaked, heavy-handed blunderers could scarcely steal away from the gulch-bottom on their strange horses without our having heard a sound!

Another trailing half-hour. And never the snap of a twig, a ground tremor, a pinfall.

CHAPTER ELEVENTH

AND A BLAST, SOLO

Suddenly a brilliant idea hit me. It was a Boy Trapper Series idea, of the most swagger order; novel; original as the blue in the sky. Taking off my hat, I carefully stuck it out beyond the edge of the stockade entrance. Hah! Not a bullet chugged at it, into it. I shifted it about — fairly naturally, you know — this way and that. I tried to compose it into an interesting mark. Result — absolutely nothing.

Lifting up my second little prayer of the evening to heaven, and shoving my Winchester in front of me, I followed the hat on out into the open with head and shoulders, squirming pancake-flat on a mighty weak and unaccustomed stomach. Soon even my legs were clear of the stockade. It was something to do, active, moving. And how alluringly simple!

As I put good wriggled yards between myself and the cabin, however, and the chances of being potted by the herders grew cheerily less, I had to think the more of Scaramouch and Glendenning. A handful of buckshot from the loop-holes would stop me just as effectually as a slug from off among the trees. My big hope, though, was the fire. It burned strong and high again now, casting a broad light. And Scaramouch and Glendenning — they were the real gun-fighters, not your skittish, panicky sort who shot first and looked after-

ward. I knew I could trust them for that. In fact, everything played straight into my pilgrim book. Scaramouch and Glendenning spied me from the house-wall; recognized me; came tumbling out hotfoot, with Eloise at their heels, into the stockade. But by this time I was safe in the border shadow of the pines.

"Stay there!" I besought them all in a low voice. For answer, Scaramouch made as if to crawl headlong after me. "Miss Duncannon and her father — stay there!" I knew that would put a spoke in his wheel. "I'm just going to see what's happening. I'll be right back. Be ready to cover me up, in case I have to come a-jumping."

Eloise's uncomprehending strangled cry tore deep at me across the span of ruddy night. But I crushed the weakness down; and, paying no heed to the bitter protests of the other two, thrust away into the dense black of the timber.

From my stomach I had now climbed to a capable half-crouch. Most, most, daintily, you may believe, did I launch into this new solitary adventure. Peering, feeling, exploring with every sense, I tried to stem the blind tangle of dead and living branches without leaving a ripple. It did not take long to prove all the circular fringes of the park empty of crooks. However, as I had been practically cold sure of that from the moment I had craned my head clear of the house logs, the discovery rather lacked punch. I was by no means enough of a mountaineer to stand still and smell the case out. Throwing loose in wide tacks, I hunted the clew. Soon I had it.

About midway between the little green jewel of a park and the lower valley — the edge of the timber, I

mean — lay a deep rocky hollow. It amounted, almost, to a lateral ravine or gully, scalloped entirely up the main eastern wall of the gulch. Only, it was so shallow everywhere (a mere indented line), except at the one point. Here it bit solidly into the rock. And here, relatively protected and hidden, as they figured, in this one steep-sided, bowl-like cavity, higher up on the mountain slope than we were, yet not above five hundred actual yards from us, as the crow flew — here the whole precious tribe of woman-raiders had taken refuge.

A full slouching dozen or more of them I counted; young Doerck, Flynn, Jericho Smiles, Judge Toney, Nigger Bill Jackson, Rody Snodgrass, Hare-lip, Big Ed Snowy, Dutch Klem, Spavin Haggerty, Hone Fields, Sandy Wabash; the very pick and choice of the floating riffraff; the chevaliers, the Galahads, of our chaste Swallowfork gang. A crew to give one a blighting humanitarian indigestion, that — just to glance at them! They had built themselves a small fire, and were closely camped in about it. The notion of any such thing as scouting on our part — surveillance — seemed never to have occurred to them.

One smoky blot of detail in the striking chiaroscuro of the picture caught and held my eyes; held me as did none of the living men. It was the body of Mickey Devine, slackly flung across an angle of bare notched rock in the break of the background. That ingenuous Scaramouch — he must have been quite right about the “somebody flopping around a whole lot” in the three young pines! A horrible, gory, fascinating spectacle the sheep-herder carcass made there on the slant of shadowy gray stone, calling up a thousand sharp and complicated emotions into one’s breast. . . . Congruity

— Mickey Devine — the last trump! . . . Quick — dead. . . . Also I observed that brawny Jericho Smiles had his left arm bound in a rude sling. Technique of war! We apparently might have done worse, from the execution standpoint, with the ten-gauges.

No question, a big damping change had come over the spirit of the outfit since, three or four hours earlier, it had so riotously chased me up the gulch. Nobody showed in the least unreasonably drunk now. Still, notwithstanding a good deal of sulkiness, enterprise was again plainly in the air. Silent, intent, the dogs had their filthy heads together over something. I cocked the Winchester under my handkerchief, crept nearer.

Then, between two bats of an eye, as it were, swift as a nest of divers, they had all scattered; sprung away; leaving Nigger Bill Jackson alone in the middle of the firelight. I shook with excitement. What the deuce was it? There had been no warning — nothing that I could hear. And why had not the yellow nigger bolted with the rest? He stood easy and collected, clutching in one hand what looked to be a short, round stick, in the other a long piece of heavy dangling string.

“Shucks, you-all sure would make a hot bunch of high-grade quartz miners! By gum, you-all sure would!”

I listened, open-mouthed. That was Bill, wickedly sneering at his white lamb-smacker brothers!

From ten yards away, lumbering Jericho Smiles snarled back — “Well, what the holy blazes do *we* know? —”

“Tear a bone out, they’re that dod-rotted a-scared!” Bill was now simply and gloomily addressing himself, it seemed, to the lowering June night.

"I say, what the holy blazes do *we* know?" savagely repeated Jericho. "You and your cursed lying nigger truck!"

Winged arm and all, this clumsy giant was probably the most inherently formidable man here. The yellow cook evidently thought it policy to propitiate him.

"Ain't that what I been *a-telling* you?" he retorted. "Now listen. Ain't I just come straight away down from the mines? Ain't I? Didn't I put in five lathering years of it up there, sledging with a drill, doing every dam' job on the place? Didn't I? Didn't I steal this here very stick of kyooting old stuff right out of the Lightning Lead's tool-house? Hey? Ain't she big medicine? You wait! And don't I savvy her like I do sowbelly and beans?"

I snailed in and down the hollow another two yards on him, screwed up my eyes to gimlet-points. So help me, the thing he had clamped in his left hand was a chunk of dynamite the size of a coupling-pin!

"Nosirree!" proudly went on that mulatto devil, wrestling with the refractory fuse. "Nosirree! This here little old blast won't go off none till I'm good and ready to *put* her off." He grinned from cruel foxy ear to ear. "Then I reckon she'll go off plenty."

"And what'll she do when she goes off?" ventured Hare-lip, in his bestial voice, from the extreme rear of the herder clump.

Again every one of Nigger Bill's small white teeth glistened in the fire-rays. "What'll she do? *What?* You'll see what! You'll hear what! She'll blow that cabin and them fancy dude jokers so far into hell!—"

My scruples against killing a man (especially against

killing a drunken man) had been absolutely sincere. But this coolly grinning saddle-colored assassin! Your gizzard made no hint of commotion at the thought of tramping out *such* a snake!


The issue now merely was — how to trample him out so as to count most. For time pressed. An idea came to me. (I bristled with rare ideas to-night!)

Meantime, miner Bill was working feverishly away with his dynamite and fuse in the brightest of the fire-shine. I edged farther down into the bowl, pushing and nursing my cocked Winchester breathlessly before me. At last I could manage to squint through the sights. It was a clear field, in so far as the other crooks went. I could have done with more light, certainly. However, the nigger stood bold out in the heart of what tame and meager fire-flicker there was.

Only, I did not hold exactly on him — not on the nigger. Low brush aided me in the prosecution of my device. My Winchester rested solid across the thinly screened top of a rock. After a painfully long bead, drawn as fine on the fat stick of dynamite as I could draw it, I pulled trigger. Then, in a frantic continuation of the same movement, I grabbed up the rifle and tried to run. But the explosion was too near, too splintering, for anything as clever as that.

I closed my eyes, I didn't want to see. A frightful general impression of the flash and roar I could not escape, naturally. After that, though — well, I don't think, after that, there was much camp-fire left to see by.

The very first instant I could — the instant the ground had steadied a trifle underfoot, the violent knock-down reverberations a trifle died out of the en-



closed gully air, you understand — in this first instant, I staggered up, took to my heels. Dazed and half-blinded, irresponsible as I was, you may gamble that I yet humped myself, traveling just regardless. Crazy terrified yells resounded behind me in the dark, twigs and stones came rattling down like hail about my ears. I couldn't tell whether I was being chased or no. Bearings completely gone, I floundered desperately.

Be sure, all this happened most mighty fast; miles faster than I can get the sense of it out of me now. When in a minute or so I had really found myself, I legged it for the park as super-industriously as I knew how.

Bedlam June night! Truly there never was a warmer beacon than the red peep of our fire-glow through those surrounding black cones of trees. I loped and stumbled toward it, signaling to the cabin while still some way off. Soon I was dashing full-speed across our little plot of open, with strong paws eagerly reached out to drag me into the safe folding of the stockade. Home! Thus — bang! — and one's heroic bit of a guerilla episode had faded into the perspective of universal history. Universal history, at the very least! . . .

Inside there, Eloise, hands tightly clasped, hung voicelessly back from the others. Magsie, on the contrary, a more vivacious female type, frisked and spoke to me abundantly with her eloquent pool-like eyes. As for Scaramouch and Glendenning — that contrasted and interesting pair of shotgun artists had done nothing but ply me with queries from the second my streaming face hove into view. They had heard the roar, of course; were all on tiptoe.


“What the thunder — how — when — where? Who was it? *Why* was it? Had it been a keg of powder? Were the crooks trying to blow up the whole blamed side of the mountain? By jiminy! Had I been there — seen it? What the thunder, Matt?”

I had to sketch every detail of that pretty fantasy in the hollow over and over again. Very likely I invented new subtle touches to go with it each repeat. Eloise, her fingers always strainingly intertwined, her pale lips slightly parted, followed my lips, mute. But the squat Swede boy and Glendenning — what shall one say of them? They were simply unmanned, ravished, with merriment. They dilated and collapsed, beat their hard thighs, waked the sensitive echoes of this narrow castled place (Scaramouch, in particular) with their prodigious and indecent horse-laughter.

Between them, in the end, they made such an ungodly racket that Doctor Duncannon roused inside the cabin with a startled cry. Eloise hurried in to him. Presently seizing my chance — Scaramouch and Glendenning had blessedly forgot me, for one whipstitch, in the heat of their delighted double dithyramb on the virtues of buckshot as a war munition — presently seizing this first glint of chance, I slid in under the canvas flap after my girl. The soft diffused murmur of her voice greeted me, filling all the dark room with its sad music. For, in her infinitely tender way, she was still soothing her father.

When she had at length got him quieted, she came across the empty space of floor to me. We stood a little while so, silent, close together, hands caught in hand.

Suddenly she half-sobbed, in a convulsive whisper —



"No, I can't make it out! I try — I do try. But I can't ever see. It's hopeless."

"What, darling?"

"Life."

Holding her strong, I said — "My wild-goose chase just now? You mean that?"

"Yes. I suppose so. That — everything."

"It was pure nerves, hysteria — my going off wild just now."

I could feel her shaking her head. "No. It's Life. Everything — whether you love or hate — everything is like that. Forced from the outside — some dreadful unknowable power. Unknowable. And always will be. Death is like that, too."

She would not let me embrace her. Those despairing age-old words! How many had spoken them before? But to-night, in the filth-beleaguered dark of this mysterious mountain shack, cried out by a lovely and haunted child of nineteen! With her great dismantled father faintly snoring on his bed of pine-boughs a few feet across the dirt floor! Nineteen. And tennis, innocent dancing, garden-party tea — the careless summer world of other girls of her sort! . . .

Well, after thirty years, not a pulse of that moment, I think, has abated in my soul. Vivid, enveloping, indescribable, there the enigma rests, there the spell still lies. "Death is like that, too." I wonder? At any rate, it will be with the remembered shape of those poignant young words on my lips, I know, that I shall one day settle back and face my own little draught of death.

Abruptly, in the long-ago June night, a rough hail from out among the trees broke my suffocating emotion.

Threats! And—infallibly I had heard that same snarl before to-night, brutal and sodden? Not a doubt! It was the lubberly black-browed Jericho.

“Don’t you smart-alec sneaks, you bush-whacking nigger-killers—don’t you reckon you’re going to get away with any of this here!” howled the big smacker. “Not by one hell of a sight, you ain’t! We’ll round you up now, rot your souls, if it takes—”

The bellow of our brace of ten-gauges—four almost simultaneous barrels—answered him from the stockade. He came back with five spitting slugs from a Colt’s—he had only the one working hand, you remember. Then followed the queer final stage of the night’s madness.

From all sides, an uncertain, irregular scattering of bullets began to pour in against the tight cabin walls. I question if above half a dozen men were enlisted in this travesty of a rifle cordon. Such shooting! Nothing more vague, pointless, perfunctory, could well have been imagined. It was mere rank stodging through the motions of an idea, after every spark of life had gone. Nobody took a hair of risk. A prayer-meeting could not have been duller. Yet the thing lasted on for hours.

I got a scratch across the wrist, a burn, tossing a piece of heavy wood out on the fire. For the rest, we lay low, not wasting our honest cartridges; though cutting loose an occasional shot, when the opening seemed possible. Night waned, morning drew on, windy and storm-presaging, with its rare six thousand feet chill. We all grew profoundly blank and sleepy.

At last, not far short of actual dawn, we heard horses, with lusty ringing shouts and curses, down in the gulch-bottom. Scaramouch and I jumped wide

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awake, cocked our ears, then danced and sparred together around the room in high relief. For in that blasphemous noise down-gulch, we had each of us picked up a particular, harsh, curt tone. Ranch-boss Bull Dorgan! The Swallowfork, then, was officially sitting into Jericho's limp game.

CHAPTER TWELFTH

PASTORALE

Soon we were standing with Bull — Scaramouch, Glendenning and I — about our smartened all-night fire. That dashed fire must have cost me a gray hair or so, in the course of the seven black hours. But its comfort now was well worth the money. And what a lark to be able to stick your head straight up in the air again too, after the beastly worming and creeping and crouching, with the whistle of a bullet always just above the tip of your ear. A fine gun-shy rookie I would have made of it for the real war, the 75-millimeter war! As things were, I stretched my soul in this damp Montana dawn freedom as if I had been down in the trenches a solid month.

Even the intrusion of Bull's burly shape into our midst filled me with admiration. I can't say, for the picturesqueness, that it had been much of a rescue. Leading his crew of Swallowfork regulars, the grim foreman had routed Jericho and our discouraged siege outfit at a charge. Or rather, it had asked only the bare sound of a voice, familiar and cold, to crack this glittering investment.

Bull, in effect, owned the quality of voice that ordinary drifting men are accustomed to line up at the hint of. He was bleak, ruthless, absolutely strange to the sense of odds; the strong-arm ward heeler in a superlative frontier perfection of the type; your sheep

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foreman in a thousand. Besides which, if he had needed anything else, he carried always the shadow of Sheriff Tek Gaines, proprietor of the ranch, at his back. But Bull needed no shadows.

Already to-night he had been up to the raiders' camp in the hollow, looked over the situation. As we stood for a minute about our fire in the first leaden strip of day, we could hear the two sets of herders stridently guffawing and cursing at each other down there in the gulch-bottom.

"Well," declared Dorgan, "as the whirl seems about over, and as I've got pretty nigh every suffering hand on the place right up in this here timber, I expect we'd better be crawling our ponies some. Or no Swallowfork sheep won't be worked to-day." He turned to me. "You'll range your wether band out same as usual?"

I was only too mighty glad to be able to assure him I would.

"But you ain't told us yet," said Glendenning, "how you come to be in on this?"

The old Piegan hotel keeper was proving, as I had hoped he would, of invaluable service to us in this awkward pinch. Bull, I could see, treated his presence on the scene with genuine interest, approval; almost with respect.

Now, for instance, good-humoredly scratching a hairy ear, he — the foreman, so clipped and autocratic with us — took full time to explain.

"Oh, I was sure to rope up something sooner or later," he declared. "One of my own regular boys tore loose with the stray lot day before yesterday. He swarmed into town along with 'em, and got drunk.

About two this morning he'd sobered near enough to ride back home and wake me up. 'What?' I says. Well, he allowed maybe there *might* be a snootful of trouble on the cards."

For one reason or another — God knows why — we all laughed.


"But," went on Bull, "it don't seem like you needed help much. Two plumb soared away to the happy hunting-grounds, and four more nicked, is a right fair shake-up, for an evening."

Four nicked? He meant crippled, of course. What four? Jericho was the only nicked man I had seen on my adventure. We pressed Bull.

Still humorously (if you had the hardihood to call that primitive irony "humor"), he swung again on me.

"Oh, just some little casual side ructions. When you run afoul of the dynamite nigger. A sure cute way you have with niggers, ain't you? And Rody Snodgrass shy an eye, they figure; and Ed Snowy a bunch of fingers; and Judge Toney — he's got a hole in his belly as big as the top of a tomato-can. All from where loose chunks of rock inadvertent flew up and gouged into 'em, I guess."

There it was, the abominable chaotic picture, exactly as I had tried not to glimpse it! I had no right to duck the responsibility, of course. Still, it threw me instant sick — that picture — sick to my squirming toes. But Scaramouch responded to Bull's delicately jocose mood enough for two; and, through my vertigo, I could hear Glendenning swear, plaintive and disgusted. "Then I reckon I didn't get nobody at all."



Such dishonor to the scutcheon of an elderly Indian fighter! No, that was too much for the heart of our generous Swede boy.

"Sure you got somebody, mister!" he gallantly protested. "Sure you did. Maybe you got Mickey. I bet you did! I never spotted anything out there for dead certain. I bet you got Mickey, all right. And that son-of-a-gun of a Jericho too, maybe, mister!"

But Glendenning would only gloomily shake his spare head. He was no sentimentalist, in these matters.

"We're packing the one remainder and the four invalids down on their Rainbow livery hosses," said Dorgan. "As for the yellow nigger!—" He made a conclusive wide gesture. "Nope. The mountain ants'll just have to gather *him* up and plant him. We didn't bring no sieve."

"Oho!" the despondent Glendenning quavered, baleful. "He seemed considerable mixed up under the blast, hey?"

"I bet you he was some busted!" roared Scaramouch.

Bull changed his tobacco. "We found a piece of one shoe, jammed in among the rocks. And we tended to covering a couple of places up." Catching a side-wise squint at the rapidly graying sky, the ranch-boss hitched his overalls with a snap. "Here! I got to be pulling my freight."

Scaramouch scrambled wildly about. "Hold on!" he expostulated. "Wait! Coffee! I'll have her boiling in two flips—"

But Dorgan could not be tempted.


"Ten miles," he growled, "and a clutter of no-ac-

count squalling roustabouts to be hazed through." He flung a nod to Glendenning. "Better stop in at the ranch. Tek'll probably be riding out."

Without another word said, his grizzled foretop falling unkempt on corrugated brows, he strode heavily away, disappearing down our path to the gulch-bottom. A renewed clash of noisy activity greeted his arrival down there. Then the confused hoof-beats of many horses resounded. After that—the fine clean resurgence of the mountain stillness.

I suppose I might as well wind up this incident now. It is extremely easy, in a sense. I mean, in a material sense. If there was ever any official county enquiry into the death of the two grotesque and wolfish skirmishers, I knew nothing of it. The wretch called "Judge" also died in Rainbow, I believe, of the wound in his stomach. But nobody seemed to care, nobody took these diseased and floating sheep-camp outcasts seriously enough to bother whether they lived or died. Down-and-out missions and humanist societies had not got much of a grip yet in Montana in '84. Men simply came and went.

As for me, quietly feeding my wethers back here on the far mountain edge of Pinto Basin—I heard nothing, asked no questions. Our curious sylvan-bucolic life, half antique, half burningly modern, readjusted itself and flowed on perfectly remote and undisturbed again. As was inevitable after such an orgy, I conceived a violent, almost guilty, hatred of the whole past nightmare of brutality and gore. Though the raiders' hollow in the mountainside was so close to us, never till at the very end of the summer did I let myself stray within a stone's throw of it. I daresay



some men might rate this elaborate, over-squeamish. In my sleep, as a matter of fact, I had to see a good deal of the places. Waking, I had had all I wanted; all, that is, till the crowning bitter time at the end of my gulch stay.

However, to stick to the morning after the fight, the morning of the first day of summer. You would never have thought it the first day of summer—this. Hardly had Scaramouch got properly started at our camp breakfast (the home-ranch squad could not have much more than cleared the mouth of the gulch), when the thing that had been brooding in the sky all night long, broke. The air grew sullenly cold; cold as December. A few big icy raindrops spattered down. Then the hail began, thinly and spasmodically for a minute or so, quickly steadying to stiff earnest; an ominous and steely rattle. The cheap fusillading of the sheep-herds had been nothing to it.

Summer? One stared in amazement. For that Rocky Mountain June hail was no joke, I can assure you. The daunting arctic stones of it scaled anywhere in size from a stage Camille's diamonds pretty well up toward what David must have used in his sling-shot. Solid, vicious, sharp-cut, they drove straight down. The gulch was alive with missiles; an incessant crashing and battering deluge.


About one clout from a Goliath-sized stone, and we snatched our pots and pans off the hissing fire and scuttled under cover of the shack; which (thanks to Scaramouch) now had a capital new pole roof, soundly daubed with clay. From here we could look snugly out and wonder at the wicked, gray, elemental slash, and speculate how Bull and his gang, old Crow, Glen-

denning's hobbled wagon horses and my corralled sheep were making it. For such a storm as this, understand, spelled real havoc. Unprotected stock might go crazy, do any frantic stunt, under the terror of that relentless bastinadoing. And my wethers, shorn and tender. . . .

In twenty minutes it was all over, the ground piled six inches deep with melting leaden crystals. I could not wait now for fire or breakfast. As the most moderate shepherd in the world, I had to get Crow and hike down for my band. Eloise, of a sudden gone shaking and distracted, insisted on venturing out with me. In the double reaction from fighting and storm, she seemed at last completely to lose hold of herself; to fly to mere schoolgirl bits. Desperately twisting her hands, she wept that she must, *must*, catch her breath somewhere, far away from this dreadful cabin! Her father was long up and showing his delighted, scientifically childlike interest in the hail. He would never miss her. Scaramouch and Glendenning gladly offered to watch him, to tend to everything here; so we bundled up her feet against the freezing wallow of slush — poor pale and shuddering waif! — and I did take her along with me down the mountain.

My sage old Crow we found well bored in against the façade of castle rock-wall, under shelter of the cubbyhole pines. What with these, and with the big cow-saddle covering half his back, he was calm and sleepy; not an ace the worse for wear.

So much for above. But below! There we found one side of my pole sheep-corral down, with a dozen or twenty crushed and trampled wethers lying about, and the rest of the band foolishly scattered in bunches



over all the nearby hills. We found Glendenning's two wagon ponies gone, stampeded, from my little wire-grass meadow; and didn't round them up, out of their clever rock-screened hiding-place, till late in the evening. Minus their gunny-sack hobbles they were by then, of course.

I shall always remember my girl's faint outcry as we plowed free of the shadow of the timber this irrational June morning. I, afoot, was leading Crow by a hackamore-rope; she, still in her last night's festal Billings' dress, riding behind me, one knee hooked park-fashion over the horn of my cumbrous cow-saddle. I say I shall always remember the faint cry that escaped her at the chill lustrous sight we met. No sun shone. But all the lower sweep of gulch lay open before us, densely blanketed, in the strange afterbirth of a summer solstice, in six inches of sleety white.

"How cruel!" she exclaimed. And then, swiftly — "But how good, too! It will wash away the blood."

And for both of us, as we halted and peered down the unfamiliar vista, that melting hail did then and there blot out some evil-smelling part of the night behind us.

The thing may not have been great logic. It may not have been great morality. Whether the frugal earth eternally swallows back blood and waste into her teeming vitals or no, I didn't attempt to enquire. I didn't care. "Sport of tragedy." The tormented corners of Eloise's sweet pale lips fluttered down on me in the wisp of a returning smile. I thanked God for that. Who was she, at her innocently grave nineteen — who was she, I said, to be shouldering the burden of Time's accumulated cynicism and perversity and

despair? . . . She was my girl. And she smiled, or almost.

“Sport of tragedy.” So! We should see. And after all, this morning, overhead and underfoot, a million tiny signs told the day. Sweatshop eyes, the eyes of any tenement brat, could pierce the freakish mountain masquerade. Yes, after all, it was the twenty-second of June! . . .

Well, and so — summer. Those next three sovereign inscrutable months! Can a man — an old man, casting back thirty crowded and various years — can he have dreamt such a summer?

No, it must really have been. I cannot hope to prove it, to describe it. All I can say is, quite simply, that I was very happy. For a full rich summer’s tide, I had captured the uncapturable. Even I, the crass drawing-board drudge, the grubber, the lamp-smelling reader of books — one whole, long, plummy summer’s span of it — I — happiness! What thought could there be in me of more than pronouncing the bare colorless words? Now, at this day! . . .

To herd sheep, under the common circumstances — ah, that is a loathsome fate. The sheep are so fabulously many against you. And this overpowering mass of stupidity, this huge formless bulk — presently it begins to drag you down — down and down and down — to its own unmentionable level. You get to understand the utter helplessness of your boasted human intelligence as opposed to it. Brain is no good, you see. Force is no good. Nothing is any good. You lose heart, insidiously down and down you drop. The horde of maddening sottish creatures, perpetually hemming you in, blat and crop and stare. Before the

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end, if you don't look sharp, you are running on all fours beside them.

But none of these poisonous horrors was for me. If they continually lurked about, like waiting beasts at the edge of camp, I had no need to trouble. I could swagger up close; scrutinize them with carelessness, ease. For an incorruptible triumphant spirit walked always with me. I think I was a faithful enough herder. Only, all the while I herded, I was breathing, not the woolly stench of sheep, but a divine air. There could be just the one word for it. Romance!

On the range, in my hut, by sun and by stars, in stillness, among the sinister winds and gigantic stabs of thunder — ay, so that invincible and transfiguring spirit abided with me. Beauty dwelt everywhere in life. The herby yellowing earth warmed and caressed. The icy mountain water laved with a new delicious thrill. The sky of summer, profoundest high and bright sapphire during the day, impenetrable, dusky, spangled velvet at night, became at dawn and evening as a fiery crumbling Walhalla, as the tender and intolerable crown jewels of the world.

A dream? O most favored of outlying shepherds, patroned indeed by the mighty Pan! How I would go hungry, naked in the snow, to touch that yeasty dream again! . . .

So, from the first of the new phase, then — that pent-up, reactionary morning of bizarre summer hail — from that wan morning, Eloise spent much of each day out on the range with me.

Not that her devotion to her father lessened or changed. Extraordinarily deep and simple this could

only be. To Scaramouch (poor dumb beggar!), the development of those next days must have appeared very like change; almost like straight desertion. Certainly, indeed, the ancient irresistible law of mate to mate did begin to work in my girl's heart. Nature could be relied on there. But by now Doctor Duncannon was so far mentally sunk—it made just literally no difference at all who might be with him. Eloise brought him and Scaramouch down-gulch with her when the doctor would come. Not often would he, though.

For it was something in the quality of the mountains up there that spoke most to him. His body seemed to grow stronger again with the vitalizing summer heat. Only his mind went steadily back, grew steadily more childlike and unnoticed. As he wandered happily about over the steep face of the gulch, forever chipping at rocks with his futile mason's hammer, solemnly watching the birds and insects and flowers, he made a most grievous spectacle—ruin stalking before you incarnate, yet his dead brain never for an instant failing in the superb and lofty tenacity of its instinct. The right stock for your great experimental scientist—this. Gradually, with the finest respectful care, Scaramouch took him in full charge. From cook, the loyal Swede boy became rather nurse.

Eloise set about and rigged herself a kind of presentable divided skirt out of one of her few hardy dresses. She had been an orthodox side-saddle rider from childhood; but now she fell into the honester cross-seat habit almost without a thought. Half a dozen times a day she would ride Crow up and down the gulch. When anybody from the home-ranch swung into the wide arc

of our horizon, any intruding stranger whatsoever—then she would hastily slip on to the old white pony and lope away. For the rest, overwhelmingly the bigger part of our waking hours, we were alone together.

As the hot weather drew on, I must every day or so work my sheep down through the gravel coulées and across the hills to the head-springs of Fishduck River, for a good lasting drink. We had always a certain trickle of glass-clear brook, rivulet, in the gulch. But it dwindled now. My army of sheep could scarcely do on that by itself. The nearest point of the river was not so far away, perhaps two able-bodied cowboy miles. We would feed the band slowly down the rolling empty country to it, and slowly back; and these long sunny hours, gloriously idled among the sage, did things to my girl; tanned her pallid cheeks; made her vigorous, antelope-like, nearly wild-spirited.

Sometimes that healthy tang of caprice, wildness (bred in her, I knew, by sheer lover's joy and physical well-being), all but intoxicated me; all but swept me off my head and feet. First and last, we were no more than a man and woman, alone together out in the great golden gray-green spaces of the world. And this lambent air, this dry smell of earth, this perfect flower of life and youth blossoming within us both! . . .

Soon I had found a charming bathing-pool for her, hidden in a willow-screened bend of the so-called river; and stood guard with Magsie and the Winchester, uneasy furlongs off, while she went into the glimmering cold water. Once, even—one unforgettable July night—we stole off down here without the sheep, by moonlight.

Dusk of evening we infallibly spent together. It was our hour, sacramental, quick-passing. No matter what else had miscarried in the day (and there were rare days when pretty much everything miscarried), we met then, our very selves. Then, against the imperial evening calm that brooded down from the white crests of massed mountain — then the need passionately to unburden one's soul racked like a mortal ache. How do the psychologists explain the mystery? "Flesh and blood and something else." Those brief twilights! . . . What else?

It was in such a still ferment of dusk that I heard from my girl's half-seen lips the story of the mediæval pair, Aucassin and Nicolette. I suppose by now "Aucassin and Nicolette" is so art-studented, so American banal — it has been practically forgot again. In '84 there were no popular versions yet, I think. Eloise could say beautiful French, even Old French. Her murmuring, emotion-broken voice, the singing of the naïve and disturbing intermingled verse and prose, the cool evening shiver of cottonwood and aspen leaves above our heads — ah!

Flesh and blood and something else. Thirty years — that memory! To dare ever to try to expound such ultimate dreamings of love-drunkenness, prophecy, revelation! . . .

Well, we had our secret woodland nooks, piny and fragrant and sweet as the thin mountain dew. And we had the open country. So it went with us. One week, two weeks, three weeks, of July slid away into the halcyon wake. More and more unresistingly our dusk-of-evening trysts lasted on while moon and stars raced across the measuring strip of fathomless black

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heaven above the gulch. Scaramouch's faded blue-green eye on me became fixed and surly; menacing, fierce. Eloise and I were frankly betrothed. He understood that. He understood it—fine squat watch-dog that he was!—without being in the least satisfied.

I had a ring, and my girl and I often spoke urgently between ourselves of marriage. But marriage, conventional marriage, out here on the primal fringes of the Montana summer range! Yet, such nights—of restless strangeness, of languor, of englamoured beauty! The gods decreed them to drive us only the one way.

CHAPTER THIRTEENTH

RIDING BIBLE MARRIES US

My ring was a sort of family fetish, heirloom. It had been willed to me, instead of to my elder sister Julia, by our old French grandmother, whose favorite I seem to have been. Grandmother Hainlen was a queer old woman, rather stunning; and she prized that simply-chased flat gold band as if it had been something precious. It did have a piece of the usual innocuous family history woven up about it, of course. I was not much interested; and would gladly have turned the souvenir, with all its remarkableness, over to poor Julia. But my mother wouldn't hear of it. The ring brought luck, you see. So I had got in the habit of wearing it, though it pinched my little finger like a vise.

"It only brings luck to the *women* of this family," tearfully insisted Julia.

"Nonsense!" said my mother, who was not French. "We'll give it a chance to bring Matt his career."

The neatness, the absolute finished ribaldry, of Life's little processes! Comic? Ay, they do drag a grin out of one, from time to time. . . .

But I told Eloise about that old Hainlen ring, and she seemed to understand, and to fall glowingly in love with it at once, as if seeing all the fond prejudice, the quaintness and strength of our superstitious, harsh, Norman background.

"Yes, soon, now, dear ring — soon I shall have you for my own!" she crooned, caressing it, when I showed it to her, and holding it to her heart. "Soon, soon — not bought in a shop — my Matt's — the rarest wedding-ring in all the world!"

Which is a sample of how she treated me and my trifling knick-knacks. And the ring did fit her too, as if it had been built for her. When Riding Bible pronounced the ancient binding over us, and I slipped it on her finger, eager and outstretched. . . . But I had really placed it on her finger days before that.

Social ideas are perhaps fantastic things. Eloise, naturally, would scarcely have the same ones as the average nice middle-class New England girl. The daughter of Doctor James Duncannon, the student of "Aucassin and Nicolette" — how could she? Recall that within twenty-four hours from the moment we first set eyes on each other, we were confessed lovers. Caution? I don't believe her mind could even conceive this kind of petty meanness. Mere daily living on her plane was a passion, splendid and exalted. So — you may imagine — when it would come to marriage! . . .

"We must make it very beautiful," was what she said to me. "It must be as beautiful as —" She turned her intent, smouldering, blue-black eyes inward, pondered. "I think dawn is the loveliest of all."

She could carry me up to her own immaterial heights with her. I asked nothing, gave my grosser spirit unreservedly into her care. So our real bridal came to be celebrated.

On a late July morning, that was. Well before daylight, I met Eloise at the foot of our path from the park. We neither kissed nor shook hands, but kept

silently on up the gulch-bottom, through the dark, she fleetly leading the way. She took me farther up toward the head of the long winding gorge, deeper into the mountains, than I had yet been. Mute we walked, breathing quick and constrained and low. Mystical promise throbbed all about me, in my arteries, in the vague drifting stirs of chill air. Just as the first subtlest fingers of dawn began to brush away the mid-summer night, we reached my girl's foreordained place.

She whispered to me—"You stand on your side of the brook, and I'll stand on mine. Then we'll watch till a promise of pink touches the sky. That shall be our sign to kneel."

I had prepared myself for the ceremonial by literal prayer and fasting. I was fresh-bathed, in my freshest and whitest clothes. . . . O young prodigy of surrender, incantation of immemorial faith and abandon! Veritably—Youth, Life—yes, these used me once! . . . I peered about, sensed the inspired spot. A blind nobility of aspiration seized me, choked my throat. In so far as I had been able, by the starkest effort, to make myself clean, I was clean now, body, mind and soul. As for the mild creature who had visioned all this! . . .

The marriage-place she had elected was as fair and fine, as exquisitely virginal, as everything else about her. Our rill had certainly more water in it up here than down by my sheep-camp: I suppose some of the flow seeped away in that tangled course to the alkaline lower ground.

When I had taken my bridegroom's side of the stream, we stood on opposite grassy banks of a narrow channel just below a little circled pool. At the upper

end of the pool, so near that gem-like drops of blown water incessantly sprayed and thrilled us, the brook tumbled twenty feet over a smooth ledge of rock. Even this — a classic fountain, a feathery tinkling waterfall! And all as dim and pure as in the dawn of the first day!

I am an architect; and, in so far, I may assume, though a specialist in another department, yet a kind of indirect church-builder. I think I have seen pretty well all the great altars. I adore chiseled marble. More or less, I know the points, for approved wedding purposes, of colored glass, ecclesiastical laces, woven cloth-of-gold, incense, organ music.

But picture this, I ask you — that tall, wet, misted face of Montana granite; the stainless little singing cascade; the dull silver pool; the untrod walls of dark evergreen lifting austerely up to right and left!

Till flush of full dawn we waited, still, consecrate; mountain dawn that came flaming on under myriad soft veils, like a milky burning opal. Then we knelt on our two sides of the stream, and handfasted across the limpid running water, and said the vital parts of the marriage service aloud together, and I put the ring on her finger. Strong day burst heroic and swift in a riotous summer blaze. High aloft, a flash of ocher yellow shot athwart the gray mountain tops. Beamy and sheer, down it slid.

Flinging myself across the rill, I caught my girl up in my arms and waded with her out into the brightening pool. Sharp up to the very foot of the glittering little ribbon of cataract I waded, and stood under the thin play of it, and let the crystal icy water pour on us both, as if from over the walls of heaven; Eloise

lying rapt and death-quiet on my breast. . . .

Marriage! And *only* marriage — that?

Well, holiness is as one finds it, of course — if he ever has the luck to find it! I profess to be no oracle. Life is life, the heart changes, the mind changes. Anything may happen. Miracles are always happening. But the many and many a bludgeoning long night I lay awake and wondered if there could be any power — any uttermost power in Time or Chance — that might avail to sunder the filaments of such a union! . . . Still, one mustn't be allowed to rave.

As for that heathen wedding by the pool — no, you may be very confident it would never have satisfied the sound and fastidious soul of our glum Scaramouch. He had his own proper notions about weddings — this person. And he would fight for them. So, at last, to be quit of all reproach with him, we packed him up on old Crow late one blessed day, and sent him out into the world to dig up somebody who would come here and tie the knot for us in regulation shipshape fashion, either ecclesiastical or civil law, with a marriage certificate and all the honest sure-fire trappings. The fellow went willingly enough, was gone forty-eight hours.

Did I mention that Magsie had long ago fulfilled her female destiny and cropped up on a morning, the reminiscence of pain still in her glistening eyes, with a litter of seven woolly puppies? It was her first family, and Jove — pride! The seven fat little beggars were waddling about everywhere now, making us no end of trouble, but delighting us too as only a mess of healthy yapping puppies can delight you. Even Doctor Duncannon would often come down to

my shack these days to watch, or perhaps to study, them. Eloise got permission from Bull to pick out one of the litter for her own, to take back east with us; and settled on a charming wistful brown tagger, with his mother's eyes; the runt of the lot, whom she — Eloise — impressively christened Solomon.

The two nights Scaramouch was away I slept at the park. Nothing in the least strange or startling disturbed the idyllic mountain serenity of the hours. More than a month had now passed since our big deadly skirmish with the herders. A month! We were so snug and peaceful and pastoral and happy. Had it ever really been different from this? Had it? Why, all that old beastliness and gore — that now seemed part of some former life, back in a remote darker age. We had nearly forgot it. Nearly, yet not quite.

Toward the close of the second day of his mission, Scaramouch came jogging round the lower flare of gulch from the east. I expected him, and spotted old Crow instantly from where I was leisurely working my wethers in for corralling for the night. Magsie had her whole nest of puppies out here with me (we were not above five hundred or so yards from the cabin at the time), giving them a stern but perfunctory lesson in nipping a sheep's heels. It was still a goodish trifle short of our twilight hour, when I meant certainly to be with Eloise at the park. She had the doctor in full and loving charge again, as you may understand, during Scaramouch's absence.

The Swede boy pushed heartily up through the sage to me, his florid broad cheeks wreathed in grins. How he could trample himself under! He had lost all the recent guardian fierceness now, was in complete high

feather at the project of our immediate marriage. And you may perhaps conjecture what my own spirits would be like, these lyric days! Scaramouch's face loomed so moon-wise over Crow's bobbing ears, I hailed him from a clear distance off.

"So. You've had luck, then?"

"Sure!" he said. "Sure I had luck. I got him."

"Fine! When does he come?"

"To-morrow."

"Fine! A preacher? What denomination?"

Crow had stopped directly in front of me. The lop-sided Swede boy squirmed and shifted in my saddle, rubbed his bristle of straw-colored hair. In one twinkling, every trace of the blissful shine had evaporated out of him — absolutely!

He stammered, reluctant—"Well, maybe not a regular, registered-brand preacher, Matt, exactly."


"Never mind," I assured him. "What the deuce do we care? A civil officer is just as good. Better, if anything! Don't worry. What is this? A judge, a justice of the peace?"

"No, he ain't no judge, neither," slowly pronounced Scaramouch. "But Mr. Glendenning, you savvy—it's all hunky-dory, Matt. Old Mr. Glendenning, he's coming out from town, with everything."

Everything! I could fathom how really perturbed the artless moralist was, at bottom, and forthwith went after him.

"Ericson," I cried, "I know you! You're trying to do yourself proud over this. You're trying to make a grand splurge. You've been flying after big game."

"Big game?" he asked grumpily. "What big game?"



"The mayor of Piegan Springs! You've been and gone, Ericson, and got the mayor of Piegan Springs! To chase himself all the way out here for us, with Glendenning!"

Our nuptials emissary shook a gloomy square head. "I tried to get him," he declared with venom. "But the dam' tinhorn was too drunk. He wouldn't come."

I fixed my own features, after an effort, for extreme gravity.

"Let's see," I said. I summed up, ticking off the points on my fingers. "No preacher, no justice of the peace, no judge, no mayor. I don't quite follow you, Ericson. What's left? Unless, of course, you mean a district bishop, or some such glittering and magnificent personage? —"

"No dam' bishop, neither!" snapped the Swede boy, who, curiously enough, was a rabid gown-hater.

"Look here!" I demanded. "Do you perhaps remember that the service we wish performed is what the prayer-book calls 'the solemnization of marriage'? Did you ever happen to suspect that it's a profoundly sacred and touching affair?"

Scaramouch uneasily protested — "My man can marry you, all right."

"Will you kindly tell me who and what the fellow is?"

Our perplexed husky cook wriggled about in the saddle till he mighty nearly threw Crow off his feet. Then, in a blurt — "He's a cowboy, that's what he is."

"A cowboy?"

"Riding Bible's his name. He knows the Bible off by heart. He's the only blamed son-of-a-gun I could get to come."

It would not have fazed Eloise and me a hair, understand, if his marrying party had been an Indian or a long-sleeved Chinaman in a queue. We were going through this vulgar second ceremony for what it might be worth in other eyes. Anything would do us. But Eric Ericson, the formalist, the stickler, the camp Mrs. Grundy! He sat above me there, nonplussed, painfully blinking and swallowing.

"What!" I yelled. "Are we to be united in the holy bonds of matrimony by a greasy, gambling, foul-mouthed, whiskey-reeking castaway of a cow-puncher? —"

"Riding Bible's a *kind* of preacher," mumbled Scaramouch. "He preaches when he's in town. He don't smoke or chew or drink or gamble or swear. He's the bronco-buster on the Cross-Arrow, down here. He's the Cross-Arrow 'vangelist."

"You light right straight back to town —" I was haughtily beginning.

But just then Eloise and her father most unexpectedly appeared, coming down the gulch. That, naturally, put an effectual crimp in my spasm of tolerably coarse fun. I quickly shook hands, cleared everything with the again broadly beaming Swede boy; and we all had a gay bridal eve supper together at the side of my willow shack.

"By jiminy Christmas, though, Matt!" guffawed Scaramouch, when we were alone a few minutes after supper, doing the dishes. "You sure had me scared plumb into a hole. I wouldn't never have the nerve to go back to Riding Bible and tell him we didn't want him."

"He'd shoot you up, eh?"

"No," said Scaramouch, "he wouldn't shoot you up. But I guess he'd send you to hell plenty."

The next day both Glendenning and the Cross-Arrow 'vangelist duly arrived in the gulch; Glendenning in his customary spring-wagon; Riding Bible on a striking black-and-white pinto horse with walleyes. Glendenning also carried his customary load of flossy Pigan wining and dining resources; or, rather, it was a very extra-special load indeed he carried this trip; backed up by extra-special social habiliments and a blank marriage certificate. Riding Bible sported nothing external to mark the character of his visit, I think; except perhaps a semi-clerical dark coat, disguised under a dense powder of alkali dust, tied on behind the cantle of his splendid saddle.

From the first casual squint up at him on the back of the foam-flecked circus horse, though, that cowboy impressed me. He was an altogether unusual figure, chock-full of temperament. His voice had a rough solid trombone quality, vivid and astringent and arresting; with a brain behind it, you presently made out, at once childlike and as intricately put together as a prize picture puzzle. He wore neither chaps nor spurs, but he had on the highest-heeled boots I have ever seen. Stuck into the loose elaborately stitched tops of the boots were his yellow sour-dough overalls; and, above these, a clean gray flannel shirt, unrelieved at the neck by either handkerchief or tie.

His hat was a huge, handsome, black Stetson, and the coat tied up into a tight roll on his saddle — well, all I can say of the coat is, that it was evidently a black frock. If you could have got by some of the


wrinkles and sunburn and layers of sallow range dust!
. . . But you positively could not.

Riding Bible just absorbedly shook the garment out, when he unsaddled, heedlessly put it on. And a clown suit on your favorite ramrod vicar would never have been half so entertaining! You soon forgot, though. That gaunt lantern-jawed fanatic was as fiercely alive as any great opera singer. Nobody but fanatics really count in the world anyway, as I have since discovered.

That last-of-July night, attired in the wrinkled and unbrushed coat, his ruddy foretop gleaming, the horseman John the Baptist married us. It was a firelight wedding. Scaramouch had built up a very decent sort of arch of greenery against the east side-wall of the house; and Eloise and I stood under this. Glendenning, in his imposing starch and broadcloth, gave the bride away; Scaramouch was best man.

Doctor Duncannon bothered us a little. He hovered more or less restlessly about the fire during the queer service, holding Eloise's brown puppy in his arms and scrupulously followed, therefore, by Magsie. However, he did vaguely sense that something not quite everyday was going on; seemed vaguely stirred. The instant Eloise could get from my side to him, she took away the puppy and wrapped those thin and flaccid arms about herself, and tenderly kissed him again and again on the lips. Then she kissed both Scaramouch and Glendenning.

The adoring Swede boy's heart, at that kiss, must almost have jumped out of his body. I could see the apoplectic surge of color, the dizzy look in his eyes; which latter he kept incessantly batting. When he came to wrench my hand, he was still mechanically



blubbering what "a purty, purty wedding" it had been—"oh, purty, Matt, you bet your sweet life!"

As a bare matter of fact, Riding Bible's untamed passion had set us all rather athrob. His simple ritual was an infinitely more moving office than I would have believed possible. No doubt the leaping firelight and the fragrant bruised greenery helped a good deal. But, also, that red-headed cowboy had the voice of an Old Testament prophet. He towered leanly over the rest of us, fantastic as a dervish; his deep-set small eyes burning; a long bony forefinger measuring off and driving home the vibrant words into our agitated souls. He could scarcely have conducted a revival with more biting fervor. I daresay he busted his Cross-Arrow horses in precisely the same spirit, fashion.

Immediately after the general signing of the certificate, we had supper. But notwithstanding some humble preparations on our side in this important nuptial department, Riding Bible was far from interested. The wine he scowled at in open disfavor. He ate, very sparingly, of our commonest things; then left almost at once. He must be back on the ranch for an hour of sleep before daylight, he explained. Much against his will, I accompanied him to his horse; and, in the dark of the gulch-bottom, tried to slip the usual functional honorarium, in the shape of a couple of mild gold-pieces, into his hand. Contemptuously he threw away from me.

"I earn sixty dollars a month, sir, and my keep," he said, "riding broncos. It's more than I need." He swung up on the half-broken black-and-white pinto. "Men will not have to pay me God's wages." The pinto made a swirling flirt and a pitch that would have

stood me fair on my head. Our gaunt celebrant deftly straightened him out and shot away down the trail under the perpetual stars.

And so, you see, with all the properties, fit observances, my girl became Mrs. Eloise Hainlen. Mrs. Matt Hainlen, as they say. God! And then. . . .

But wait. It was not yet quite first August. I still had more than a month and half of my drunken happiness, still a month and a half of the unutterable pastoral honeymoon stretched out before me!

CHAPTER FOURTEENTH

GONE!

They were days that went neither too fast nor too slow. The whole wretched time instinct seemed annihilated in us.

But with the turn of summer, Doctor Duncannon also took a sharp turn for the worse. He was still able to wander about the edges of camp, in gradually narrowing circles; and, so long as he could do this, he was probably better off here than anywhere else in the world. Scaramouch, with his devotion, profound and sturdy, made a pretty nearly ideal nurse. We had good food, an almost perfect freedom from petty curiosity and annoyance. I believe Eloise and I were not more than humanly selfish, in staying on. It would have needed force, practically, to drag the doctor away from his confirmed rocky haunts, even now. And all the while, remember, I was doing my serviceable, if unlovely, sheep-herder's job.

Anyway, selfish or not in our royal gypsy happiness, as you please — anyway, my girl and I decided we would wait for her father to show a sign of losing his feet altogether. Then we should hurry him east on the double-quick.

Eloise was in the (to me) odd position of having literally no close kin. Both her father and mother had been only children, as she was an only child herself.

She had no uncles, aunts or cousins. All four of her grandparents were dead. I had such a radiating raft of blood connection, for my part — I could scarcely comprehend her New England isolation. Friends she had, to be sure, in fine and distinguished plenty. And a charming old Maine grand-aunt, whom I was afterwards to meet. But, in the end, it amounted to this: that the ultimate burden and responsibility of her father's catastrophe fell on her own girlish shoulders alone. Or on hers and mine now, thank high heaven, I could be proud to say.

In earliest September, the first sting of autumn struck our gulch air. Jove, it was magnificent — that new shivering brilliance! Doctor Duncannon took a miraculous little brace. Heartened, we hung on and on — on past the middle of the month. It did not seem reasonable or possible to tear ourselves away. The warm dust of summer blew off. Everything became exquisitely fresh, novel; blindly fascinating again.

It was on the twenty-third, if I am not mistaken, that poor Duncannon had the collapse which gave us our final imperative warning. The man rallied marvelously again; but we knew now we must not delay.

This morning, by way of marker, a vicious gusty baby swirl of snow silvered the pines for a few minutes. Scaramouch hustled right off on Crow; first to the Swallowfork home-ranch; then to Piegan Springs. At the home-ranch he notified Bull to send up another herder in my place. In Piegan he had only to tell Glendenning we were ready to start. That handsome and well-tried friend of Eloise's whom I had once so scurvily suspected — he would manage the town end for us, the transportation to the very railroad.

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We could hardly be said to have any packing left to do. Our old untrammelled wild-air routine, our pastoral of love, during these last few days! . . . Perhaps you may fancy we would not hug the flying seconds of it to us? At Billings — at Billings, ay, we should become a merely civilized husband and wife.

Dorgan seemed to have trouble finding a man to take over my foothill wethers. Scaramouch returned from Piegan at noon of the twenty-fifth. Glendenning would be up for us with a hack and wagon to-morrow. Scaramouch had no more than quitted me, on his sad road up to the park (I was out on the range alone with my sheep at the time), than Bull Dorgan came loping along from the home-ranch on his heavy roan. I should be relieved of my band that same afternoon, he promised: he had had to send into Rainbow for the substitute herder. Bull casually asked if we had happened to see or hear anything of your Rafe Doerck and Whiskey Flynn about. Word had drifted in, via Rainbow, that the precious pair were on a hunting trip somewhere in the mountains, back there. The foreman pointed up behind our gulch. He would be glad to give them work for a couple of weeks — the infernal mongrel loafers! — if he could stumble onto them. Then he loped away. Infernal! . . .

Now, I must swear on my soul, I barely thought twice of Flynn and Doerck. All that old row seemed so long ago, more than three incredible and heavenly months! And with this last day before the big break in our life on me — the excitement, the recapitulation, the effort to gather up all the final supreme tang of it on my palate! . . . No, no — incredible truth — I barely gave Flynn and Doerck a second thought!

Scaramouch had already ridden on up to the park, as I say. He did not even hear Bull's allusion to the hideous miscreants.

About two o'clock or so, Eloise rode down to me. My relief herder had not shown up yet. After a long absorbed hour spent out in the sage together, my girl left Crow with me and went back afoot.

"I'm going to climb to our marriage-place by the waterfall, darling," she said. "When I've seen that once again — yes, then I know I'll be ready to turn my face away east." She clung to my shoulders. "I'm so sorry you won't be with me. I'll wait there a while. If your man comes soon, fly, fly, to me!"

I could not in honor desert my wethers at this eleventh hour. I just could not! It had been part of my pride, part of my faith and happiness, to be a trustworthy herder. But the millions of atrocious curses I was from that day on to lavish upon myself! Above all, for not taking mad fire at the names of Flynn and Doerck!

Well, framing my slim madonna's temples (under the blue-black hair) in my two hands, I looked gay and deep into her eyes that were the dark mirrors of all present things to me, and of nearly all future.

"I'm going to climb to our marriage-place by the waterfall, darling. . . . Ready to turn my face away east. . . . Wait there a while. . . . Fly, fly, to me!"

No special pearls of wisdom, those, I daresay. I daresay I never thought so. But they were the last words in the world I was ever to hear, as a careless young man, from a woman's lips!

It must have been well after four when my herder hove in sight. He was in the ranch camp-tender's

wagon, with his blankets and a fresh stock of provisions; for Bull meant to keep this wether band out at least another month. I stayed only long enough to exchange half a dozen sentences with the two men. When they had got Magsie tied under the wagon, so she could not follow me, I jerked heels into Crow and headed up-gulch.

My bed was at the park, where I had been sleeping again during Scaramouch's absence. But my Winchester and few traps, in bags, were still in the old cabin, and should remain there, new herder and all, till Glendenning's wagon arrived to-morrow. Some instinct, though (very likely mere growing western habit), led me to stop in at the shack and pick up the Winchester. It wasn't that I had any qualms about the new herder, who seemed a rather helpless and kindly patriarch of past seventy. I certainly did not want to hunt. I was in an overmastering hurry. As for Flynn and Rafe Doerck—they had as completely slipped my feverish and preoccupied mind as if they never had been. Yet I automatically took the two minutes to duck into the willow cabin for my gun.

Would my girl be back from her adorable little love pilgrimage? Loping or striding afoot, I wondered incessantly. I could hardly hope to catch her up at the pool itself now. Perhaps she would be on the way down. But I must have a peep in at the park, to make sure she was not there.


Scaramouch reported on her uneasily. She had started out on a walk up the gulch more than an hour ago, alone. She had not even taken Solomon. She ought to be back—he didn't know what was keeping

her. I quickly said that I would go meet her. Then, for a marvel—a simply unheard-of thing!—the Swede boy suggested trailing along with me.

I glanced at him. He was all torn to bits, you understand, over the prospect of our leaving. He would do reasonably enough without the doctor and me, of course; though I believe he had some shade of real feeling for each of us, too. But to take away his aureoled "little girl" from him! . . . It *was* cruel. For days past he had gone about, dumb, moping, his grotesque florid face a-reek with misery. And now, this very day before the last—no sooner had he got back from our errands at the Swallowfork and Piegan than Eloise had bolted almost bang straight out of camp; first down to me on the sheep range; then off on her queer lonely walk up the gulch! He was an impossibly magnanimous friend and servant. But just this, you know! . . .

It was a jolt, yet I could not for the life of me refuse him. The doctor, after an early tour, short and trembling, of his nearest-by haunts, had now fallen into one of the long and heavy sleeps. He would be quite all right till supper-time. So there seemed no decent glint of excuse. Out of hand Scaramouch and I launched up the gulch together; though I fancy I had lost most of my zest in the enterprise. Mechanically, I still hung on to the Winchester.

We walked smartly, I leading. Perhaps a quarter of a mile above our park path, the gulch made a sharpish westward turn. As we cleared the point of this, I experienced a pang. It was a singular vivid emotion. Sudden and inexplicable, a clutch of terror seized me.



It was exactly the sort of thing — unreasoning, absolutely out of the blue — that used to be attributed to the presence of Pan.

What, then? Had my wandering Arcadian patron decided to make the pastoral summer complete, to come visit me indeed before I left his woolly New World flocks? Or was it merely a hint of some broad goat's-foot trick?

Like a squirt of vitriol, the remembrance of Flynn and Doerck seared into my imbecile brain.

"Run!" I screamed to Scaramouch. "Whiskey and Rafe Doerck — they've been seen up here!"

He must have thought me miraculously struck daft. But little matter what he thought. As to the pace I cut up that zigzag of castled gulch — I doubt if anybody, observing it, would have suspected I had been called ill in the spring. Hot as I could drive, though, the huge brogans of our lumpy Swede were trampling on my heels all the while. *He*, at any rate, did not need more than the sound of the names of Flynn and Doerck!

Up the rough and narrow wooded gut, quite up to Eloise's lovely marriage-place, we raced — and found it empty. . . . Empty!

The crisp September dark began to fall. We circled wide; combed singly down-gulch again; met, frantic and questioning, at the park. Had either of us been able to spy out one glimmer of a sign, black or white? Not one!

And then the quick-coming gorgeously-starred autumnal night. And the next day and the next night. And the next. . . .

But what use to try to describe? My beautiful

and heroic girl had disappeared, was gone. As abruptly and unaccountably as she had entered, so had she sped out of my random life. It was as if even the fact of her disappearance must be raised to a passionate and mysterious *nth* power, like everything else about her. It was as if she had supernaturally been dragged down into the earth or translated alive into the skies.

That first afternoon, that first night, Scaramouch and I practically exhausted all our commonplace search resources. In the beginning, high up on the gulch-sides, the sunlight still flooded rock and tree; serene, warming, strong. But even then spectral inky shadows were creeping and blurring in the straitened bottom cleft. Up and down those rugged mountainwalls, back and forth, crossing, scissoring like a pair of distracted bird dogs — so the Swede boy and I ceaselessly cast and wove; shouting; scrutinizing; blazing into the air with our guns. And always, after the tortured echoes had died — always the one answer. Only stifling silence — nothingness.

When the solid omnipresent denseness of evening came, we pulled up, consulted; embarked on a relatively methodical campaign. Scaramouch rode down to the wether camp and invited the new herder there to sleep the night at our park. He brought the patriarch right back along with him, indeed: I fancy it would not have been healthy for any man to refuse him the request. Then we waked Doctor Duncannon and gave him his morsel of supper, and fixed him snug again till the morning. That done, the cook and I shouldered our guns and started out on a long thorough loop.

You may imagine that these bold and superbly rocky



mountains would afford every facility for hiding. Our only hope now was to light on Flynn and Doerck's camp. For some sort of hunting camp they must have, and a camp implied certain inevitable conditions; water, above all.

So Scaramouch, who knew infinitely more woodcraft than I, led off. We didn't talk. It was a still clear night, cold enough to make brisk movement a normal impulse. Not that there could be anything normal in our haunted and despairing chase. The fearful, helpless mile after mile we traveled! The mounting of inscrutable pitchy ridge after ridge, the lunging down into one abysmal interior valley after another! Always our eyes strained for a flicker of camp-fire, our ears for the tiny reverberations of voice or ax, our noses for the telltale pungency of wood-smoke. And always, always, this way or that, north or south or east or west—nothing! At dawn we turned back, mocked, ashamed.

Well, that day Glendenning arrived; and we put up the general hue-and-cry. Before the end, we had twenty miscellaneous men raking, as you might have thought, every conceivable nook and cranny in the somber mountained region. Also Sheriff Tek Gaines, with posses, did his part. Last as first, it was all simply in vain.

October came, and mid-October. Three weeks—three horrid weeks, since her disappearance!

By then Doctor Duncannon had grown very weak; so appalling weak that, if I did not wish him to die on my hands out here in the gulch, I must get him home without another minute's delay. Scaramouch would

stay on, of course, and prosecute the hideous dull search — superintend it.

You will perceive that I do not at all attempt to relate what was going on inside me during these three nightmare weeks. It would make a fine unholy grotesque — for me to essay that. To have been so drowned, so drowned, once, in the steep abysses of so golden a happiness! And then, to know nothing! . . .


On the mid-October afternoon before I quitted our gulch, I climbed to the hollow in the ravine where, nearly four months ago now, the disgruntled herders had retreated for their famous powwow of war. What cruel depths of prevision my scrape had stirred in the sensitive soul of Eloise that ghastly night! O my girl, my wise girl! Why had I not seen with you, understood, taken warning, prepared myself?

“Life. . . . Some dreadful unknowable power. . . . Always will be. . . . Death . . . like that, too.”

And beyond this, even — the other May night — the first of all! With carrion Whiskey and Doerck tied prisoner by the side of the cabin. I could hear the very shadow-tones of her voice! “As a family, we have always been the sport of tragedy. We’re accustomed to it.”

Nineteen she was — a child. O irony! And my blatant bawling words! How I had sworn — I — that tragedy should never touch her! As if I were God. And now, the same two men, beasts! . . .

A long while I sat there that October afternoon, motionless on the rim of the hollow, in the exact spot where once I had lain and drawn my bead and fired, staring across at the gray slant of granite rock which



had then borne the bloody carcass of Mickey Devine. And the figure of Nigger Bill Jackson I plainly saw also; saw him holding up the fat stick of dynamite, showing the double row of his small gleaming teeth. And I saw the slimy wretch who was to die with the hole in his stomach.

These, the dead! But the living? Why — *why* had I ever left Flynn and young Rafe Doerck to poison all the springs of the world? And twice — on the two separate nights — so justified by nature that no conscience could have whispered a syllable against me — twice I had had them safe in my blundering hand!

Now that it was too late — I did my best now to try to picture them flung out, red and sprawling, on the angle of notched rock beside Mickey. But my fancy just would not achieve it. A curtain somehow persisted between. I had lost my chance.

Hours, I must have sat, trying. It was hardly rational or wholesome. Perhaps I went a little off my head. Not that it amounted to anything, really.

CHAPTER FIFTEENTH

THE WHITE VOID OF WINTER

On the tenth of November Doctor James Duncannon peacefully slept away, careless of daughter or mathematics or any other earthly consideration, in a civilized bed on his sober and comfortable farm among the Maine hills. His dead wife's aunt, a spinster, Miss Sylvia Lakeland of Berwick, was there; and half a dozen neighborhood friends.

In the welter of home-coming misery and confusion, I had not yet been able to get away back West myself. I must bear witness, though, that these fine New England people were all very good to me; refraining, as they did, with a singular courtesy, from heaping me with the reproaches I so justly merited. For I of course made no secret of my sins and derelictions in this fond calamitous business of father and child, this débâcle of love and terror and sacrifice and unmentionable affliction. . . .

When at last, on the afternoon of the twelfth, we carried the doctor to the gray country churchyard, and silently lowered him down beside his wife, a score of academic great men stood reverent about the grave. Thin snow was falling at the time, as it was also on that same afternoon, I presently learned, in the Pinto Basin of Montana.

Montana! Let me declare myself again. Notwith-

standing the crying violence of my urge West, I been unable as yet to get away from here. The was literally, curiously, just that. Inability. Doc Duncannon had lingered on and on, dragging day after day, in his mortal bed. By all the rules of human logic it seemed, his heart should in fact long ago have stopped beating. Still, his heart did not: he breathed quietly. I knew the Pinto mountains would be filled up with snow. The stress of helpless waiting was horrid, intolerable. I *tried* to leave.

But something in the atmosphere of this place would not let me go. Loath I am to suggest, much less baldly to state, that the spirit of my wife Eloise actually spoke to me. I don't want to spreadeagle. Perhaps the weakness of will was only because I now lived so continually among her familiar little household gods. In particular did I haunt her own room — dim girlish place!

Once, in desperation, I went to the point of making every arrangement to catch a certain Boston train. But no, when I tried to leave the house — well, I simply could not do it, that was all. I had to stay on will-nilly till the doctor died. It was as if my girl, watchful and near at hand somewhere, had specifically demanded this much of me.

Even after Duncannon's death there were affairs that only I, as Eloise's husband, could legally settle. These at least, though, I ask you to believe, I waived. By the early evening of the twelfth of November I was on my tortured way toward the Rocky Mountains again. My father and Uncle Bob, who at my instance had generously come to Maine for the funeral, rode back as far as Buffalo with me. Those inactive days

and nights aboard the crawling transcontinental train! This trip I did not get out at stations along the road to discuss the country with people.

Glendenning met me, after my month's absence, in Billings. He had been using every ounce of his considerable county-seat influence, while I was away; had done all that honest zeal and ingenuity and devotion could contrive. Public interest in our behalf had not been allowed to wane for an instant. But now the intrepid old fighting man looked at the ground when he talked to me, despondently shook the spare white head. Eight weeks had passed. The thing was over, he as good as admitted. Already snow had practically wiped out the last chance.

After a night, wicked and sleepless, in his hotel at the Springs, I borrowed a horse and saddle from him and pushed on out to the gulch. Only the faithful Scaramouch numbly and doggedly pursued the bitter search alone there now. He had the stockaded cabin all to himself. And the strangeness — the changes of aspect winter had brought! . . .

Our squat Swede boy received me back to the park gladly enough, no question; but without a ray of enthusiasm or hope. I could see it at a glance — those unremitting, unrewarded past eight weeks had broken even his stout heart of the north. Poor devil! And as for me — that wintry return to the vernal castled place, the haunt of happiness and wonder! . . .

Snow had come especially early in the Basin this season. It would grow bad, presently. Bull Dorgan had been forced to hustle his wether band down from the foothills on the jump some time ago.

By our roaring camp-fire, that black reunion night, Scaramouch told me how at first he had welcomed the snow. If Flynn and Doerck were still anywhere about in the mountains (and where the perdition else could they have got to?), this inescapable white blanket would be of prime aid in helping to track them out. Sure! When he was a boy back in the Pennsylvania woods, rabbit hunting had been his favorite sport.

Oh, yah, sure, he said dismally. Snow in October. Soon after I was gone.

At first he had greeted the powdery sifting fall with restless eagerness. He and our hired combing party had sallied out like beagle hounds into it; and gone over all the wild endless reaches of peak and valley again; and then, more closely, again and again after that; he, at any rate, with a fierce new energy.

And — what had happened? Nothing! It had been no use. Now, with the telltale snow, as before — nothing — straight nothing! The accursed ones had vamoosed, vanished. By God! They were absolutely not back there.

So he had let our men straggle away, one by one. What was the sense of trying to hold 'em? — without a scratch or a foot-print to work on! Everybody had plumb given up. . . . Him? Oh, he still stuck around himself — sure. But what was that? *Him!* That was only because he couldn't go. He gulped, then frankly wept. And the little girl — well, she might, somehow — yes, God blast it, she just *might* ramble back here and expect to find us, mightn't she? You couldn't tell. Besides, he had nowheres else to go to.

A rare cheerful session — that reunion in the gulch! I could not weep myself, and Scaramouch's grotesque

sniffing unaccountably exasperated me. Exhausted with travel, I slept blessed hours. In the morning we took up the hunt burden more normally together, in our old double fashion.

There was an uninterrupted week or so of this — perhaps ten days. But inch by inch the deep mountain drifts came edging down on us, blotting and smoothing out every minor detail. We had to fit in with the heavier going; to equip ourselves with snowshoes and skis.

Then I left Scaramouch again (he would not budge, and I was very content to have him stay), and struck over to Helena, to appeal direct to the governor of the territory. I had already written to him — the governor; as I had also, of course, already flooded the surrounding town newspapers in all quarters — wherever there *were* towns and newspapers — with advertisements, descriptions, rewards.

Now I made a hurried tour in person. The governor promptly received me at the capital; was mighty civil. But the best he could do for me was the arid assurance that everything humanly reasonable, under the conditions, had been tried. It was a new unsettled country, one of his advisers needlessly pointed out, rugged, full of holes that crooks might well take advantage of. My young wife, they were reluctantly driven to conclude, must be lying somewhere under the piled mountain snow. More than two tireless months had elapsed since her disappearance. They doubted if the riddle would soon be likely to be solved.

“Riddle” — “solved.” How the words sang and somersaulted in my sick brain! Nevertheless, it was the same all along that weary route, the persistent

monotonous tenor of many a queer conference. Rage, futility, despair! I slunk back to the gulch.

Christmas Day would be the three-months anniversary of the catastrophe. But a week before this, one crystal-brilliant evening, my father most unexpectedly came crackling up our path to camp, and demanded that I return home with him for the holidays. He was peremptory in the matter, and I dully bowed to the coercion. Also we "snaked" Scaramouch (his own morose and nearly literal verb) in as far as Piegan Springs with us.

Holidays! Well, I spent the Christmas to New Year's there in my old comfortable diggings in Pittsburgh, extraordinarily tended and petted, as you may conceive, by the feminine side of my family. Afterward I proceeded on to Berwick, Boston and Baltimore, to make at least some faint start at the rather formidable job of settling up Doctor Duncannon's estate.

It was a very decent little fortune indeed that the doctor seemed to have left, though in no wise orderly or shipshape. As by long odds the important share of it went to his lost daughter too, naturally, I had my hands pretty full for a while; even with the extremely tentative arrangements which were the limit of my endeavor. I do not pretend to be a business man, and I fancy I messed up this already sufficient complication till the baffled lawyers clucked their tongues at me in sheer frenzy. If my wife were dead, they kept advancing, with each fresh speculative problem. . . .

But she was *not* dead. I felt I should infallibly

know it, somehow, if she were. Silly the obsession may have been. At any rate, it had nothing to do with constitutional optimism. And I clung unshakably to it. I positively did not believe in the theory of her death. Short of that, I faced the worst. And, short of death, I believed, the worst could always be surmounted. Money, property — no, the disposition of everything must be held over for her. I escaped from the legal harriers back to Pittsburgh.

Toward the end of January I had a twenty-eighth birthday. It proved me quite old enough — this — my father and uncles thought, to be getting somewhere in the world. Notwithstanding the strain, my physical health went on being soundly good. And my hard-headed Norman people (not without a spark of sense, perhaps) argued that a renewed engrossment in work, in the architecture, might be what I most needed — the precise medicine for my soul. Sense . . . soul. The plan was to float me out in a modest New York office of my own; to push me into the seething tide. "Metropolitan," they said, alluringly.

I listened, slack, non-committal. It had for years, of course, been my one great ambition to open a New York shop. I wanted to experiment and specialize in a certain large type of uncolonial country house. This was the very chance I had so long been dreaming of.

My father and uncles perfectly understood it. Now they pinned me in a corner. I had to engage myself, yes or no.

At last I agreed. But I must have the spring; say, five more months. July. If some sign of hope were not forthcoming by the first of July — so — I nodded. Then, truly, I should buckle close down to my old

trade. That satisfied my father and the contractor uncles, never really impossible men. Immediately they set about paving the way for me. They called on all their eastern friends and agents. They secured the right Fifth Avenue location for me, over a well-known art gallery. Here and there and everywhere they put out bids for good-will. I took no part in the campaign, but drearily swung aboard train again for Montana. This — it was my third trip.

Meantime, in Piegan during January, a thing had happened to Scaramouch. It did not kill him, but just barely missed. That was about the twentieth of the month.

In my father's company, before Christmas, I had said good-by to the Swede boy, from our buggy, on the ragged outskirts of town. He, riding Crow, was very taciturn then, and afterward did not write me more than enough. However, writing was scarcely his long suit, as he would have been the first to insist. I didn't think too much of the silence. For Glendenning, on the contrary, in an unexpectedly fluid and youthful hand, had always bothered himself to send me on excellent batches of reports; racy, highly detailed, full of westernness and character. Reading these reports (wherever I might be) in the light of my own near sympathy, I was so able to reconstruct the situation out there with a kind of passable vividness. And now also, on my second winter return, I heard the story of Scaramouch's adventure again by lively word of mouth, from several varying angles.

For a while after his arrival in town, it seemed, our lumpy cook had moped. Either he just sat still in the

office of the hotel, or else followed Glendenning mutely about. It was pathetic. Glendenning did not know what to do with him.

Then, taking a marked shift, the fellow began to hang round the toughest of the busy saloons and gambling-houses. He never drank or played to any extent, and I fancy his gloomy square-cut blond mug would not be over-welcome in the haunts of gayety. One evening he explained to Glendenning that he was keeping his ears wide open among the town crooks, trying to "hear something."

Suddenly, without the least particle of warning, he plunged into a savage welter of alcohol, drinking with unexampled fury. "And when one of these here potato-peeling Swedes goes loco like that," sagely pronounced my Indian-fighter correspondent, "then, say — just look out — hump yourself for cover!"

And "hump yourself for cover" it certainly was with our poor Scaramouch. He did not drink to induce sleep, forgetfulness, ease. He never staggered, never lost his wits. The hot whiskey simply seemed to fuse everything in him to a wild ferocity. Overnight he became the local holy terror. A squat long-mustached Scandinavian berserk, he regularly put the town to flight. He took chances that would be called flatly suicidal, and the narrowness, "the dumb Swede luck," of some of his "squeaks" (as Glendenning glowingly protested to me) was prodigious. Obviously, the towhead had gone stark mad.

The night of that cold twentieth of January was the climax. Sallying out from the Orleans House stable on horseback, he rode my quiet old Crow straight into the flossiest of the Piegan combination bars and gam-

bling-hells, and was proceeding to terrorize the place for fair.

"Yah!" he bellowed, from Crow's back, at the strainingly attentive company of loungers, drinkers and players. "Yah! Bums — skunks — woman-stealers!"

He had our two big Colt's from camp in his hands, and his faded blue-green eyes were blazing.

A notorious crooked gambler named Mike Laredo attempted a diversion. Mike, who suspected one of the precarious pair of six-shooters to be bearing a trifle too definitely in his direction, made a bolt, tried to duck out through a convenient side door.

"What!" yelled Scaramouch. "You will, hey? I'll fix you!" And with a rain of bullets he tore up the floor under the man's frozen feet.

Then matters held stationary for a tick or so. Gradually, however, the owner of the joint, Steve Adamson, was hitching imperceptibly back to where he would get shy at our desperado from behind. He reached his point, and fired, and did drill Scaramouch through a lung.

But also it was the gentleman's last act, of his own volition, in this ticklish vale of high explosives. Before the Swede boy toppled off his horse, he had managed to turn in the saddle and slam three slugs, .44 caliber, into various parts of the proprietor's elegant, if dissolute, person. Then he pitched unconscious to the floor. Mike Laredo came bursting up and peevishly wanted to finish him on the spot. The crowd, though, would not have it. In a sort of fashion, our ludicrous gulch cook had flared up into the town

idol of gameness. And nobody really objected to Adamson's death.

Glendenning quickly took the downed hero in charge, and gave him every care. But the wound was acute, critical. If Scaramouch had not been so natively husky, as well as of such a confirmed clean habit of life, he never in the world would have pulled through.

As it was, he never did actually become anything like his own lusty self. When I arrived on the scene in the middle of February, he was still fast abed, weak and thin and shattered. One could see with half an eye that the shock had had some permanently disabling effect on him. I did what I could; lent a hand with the nursing; helped try to set him up on his rational sturdy feet again.

And so — February of '85. Eloise had been gone since late September. Doctor Duncannon was cold under ground. Scaramouch lay apathetically here on his broad bony back. As for me, though neither dead, lost nor disabled, I existed only in a kind of little demented inferno all of my own. Winter! Thus had our random summer gulch party split on the immemorial rocks. . . .

Even heretofore, as anybody can make out, the difficulties of the mere craft of writing have been enormous with me. A strange and bewildering new technique must more or less be got round. I have had to sweat, to slave. That was bad enough.

But now I am met by an infinitely harsher test. I have, first of all, to launch into an extended and frankly dangerous field of hearsay. That is mechanics: one

could risk that. At the very outset, however, there is an element of such indelible horror! . . .

Well. There it is. One cannot altogether shake off the responsibility. *I* could not. Some problems must be grappled with. I ask you to bear with my poor girl and me. But — how shall I put it?

In the daily life going on all about us are quite common occurrences. We hear vaguely and uneasily by backstairs reports of them. We read covert hints of them (especially in war time) in the respectable morning paper. Yet they are so repellant to our finer surfaces — these quite common occurrences — they are so reactionary and destructive, that instinctively we take refuge in the fierce denial they can possibly be. We reject them, with loathing.

So, then. That is it. My task is somehow to convey the sense of the eldest of these familiar blasphemies. The skeleton which we are solemnly banded together to disallow!

At least no eye will ever come upon this fragment of our so personal record till its power to embarrass us is past. Nor will there be any children left behind to feel the reflected slants of hurt.

After all, in effect, why may not one write with a species of historical detachment? . . . Why not? "Objectively," cries the artist! And thirty years!

Inviolable God! Perhaps this halting interlude of generalities betrays how keen-whipped I am to begin. . . . Fortunately, the worst is soon over.

CHAPTER SIXTEENTH

WOLVES AND THE DOE

In the mid-afternoon of that twenty-fifth day of September, then, my girl started up Castle Gulch on her devoted and romantic little pilgrimage to our bridal-place by the pool.

It was all just a piece of the inspired loveliness of her temper, this idea of the farewell. She could live only on the terms of such faiths, such auguries, such exaltations. Hardly anything of the innocence of the protected and flowering child had as yet been brushed from her soul. Though no stranger to misery and terror, and a full woman now, she still could not help reaching out with a beautiful vehement urgency toward everything that was young and immaculate and sensitive and alight with noble fancy. . . .

But no, my better way is to tell this stretch of the narrative as simply and straightforwardly as may be. I shall never get anywhere, else.

On that anarchic September afternoon, in short, my girl did not win to her englamoured pool.

Perhaps you will remember a sharp westward turn in the gulch; the point where, later, hurrying along upward with Scaramouch, I had experienced my sudden chill of evil foreboding. It was within sight of this rocky corner, this abrupt twist in the mountain passageway, that Doerck and Flynn sprang their delicate trap.

Always before, I believe, in speaking of the fell pair of appalling blackguards, I have followed the tradition of age, and mentioned Flynn's name first. Now I must tardily begin to give young Rafe Doerck his just due.

For his was the motivating mind, it seemed. He dictated the course in everything.

At many spots in the ascent of the gulch, such slight path as there was ran darkly in among clumps of solid scrub pine. Easy ambushing, that made. And in one of the thickest of these piny screens lurked the brace of valiant ex-lamb-smackers.

Manifestly they had been on the lookout, had spied Eloise's coming from afar. Doerck, in the premier rôle, must have taken off his coat. Having placed themselves, they let my girl step unsuspectingly in between and past them. Then they flung the coat over her head from behind. O heaven! Thus — the twitch of a sinewy hand, and she was a complete prisoner!

Weeks, months, ago she had given up her awkward wont of going armed. To-day she did not have even a trifling penknife on her. And what indeed if she had?

The scaly kidnapers tied her wrists tightly together, and so muffled her nose and mouth in the vile folds of the coat that, for a time, she all but smothered on her feet. These precautions swiftly seen to, the condemned swine led and dragged her back with them over the devious mountain game-trails.


Precipitately they drove on, for several hours. Whiskey Flynn tried to talk a little, exulting in the capture. But young Doerck would only brutally snub him, saying next to nothing himself. Amazingly, too, he — the boy — treated Eloise with a kind of human considerateness.

It was not till after nightfall that they finally halted. Eloise's shoes were torn to bits by the rough and blind traveling. Her muffled head swam. Again and again she had come within an ace of swooning away in sheer fatigue. Why she had continued to go on and on so with the pestilent wretches, in the face of everything, she did not at first know. She might at least have cast herself down on the ground and let them kill her. Only, of course — she was afraid they wouldn't kill her. . . .

And so long as she could move actively, no matter how much in the dark, no matter toward what — yes, then hope still sped foot by foot with her. For all the while her feverish and whirling brain must have been whispering to her that she might yet outwit her brutish abductors; that she might yet escape scot-free. If the herders, for instance, should take to drink and befuddle themselves before they dared stop for their impious orgy. Drink, a quarrel — anything would give her her chance.

Whiskey, she suspected, was already more than normally primed from a bottle. She could gather that much from his silly and bestial exclamations. Under the dreadful coat, she grew calmer, thought out her resources in something like clear detail. The longer they went without stopping, she felt, the better the odds for her became.

But at last they did stop. Doerck cut loose her wrists, and ordered her to get down on hands and knees and crawl. Then, truly, her soul fainted, she nearly died of terror. The vermin boy chafed her numb wrists, however; and his surly cruel voice seemed almost to hold out the tiniest hint of reassurance for



her. So she did as he commanded, pressed forward (still blindfolded) on hands and knees, through a tortuous rocky channel, over dry earth and smooth rippled stones.

After which, Doerck tied her wrists again; and now, also, her ankles. Then he removed the foul muffle from about her head. The air that struck her skin was curiously lifeless and enclosed; not sweet fresh air. For a breath or two her dazed mind refused to take the situation in. When the realization came, she could scarcely suppress a cry. A cave! She was a prisoner — a prisoner in a cave! A remote, secret mountain cave!

The two dogs lighted an end of candle; and abruptly she saw everything in the nightmare with fearful distinctness. She had never had any real doubt as to who her captors were. All the same, it seemed a kind of crazy easement now actually to *see* them. The cave was large and lofty, impressive, with a very small outlet. As a matter of fact, the candle-flame made only the puniest point of vividness in one corner of the enigmatic and shadowy vault. The whole place had an acrid wild animal smell about it, as of wolves, or of bears or mountain cats. And this, in turn, was overlaid again with the stale reek of confined wood-smoke. Doerck and Flynn had evidently been living and cooking here several days. To-night, though, they did not attempt to start a fire.

They must be on foot in the expedition, for they seemed not to have many traps. Nevertheless, the instant the candle was lighted, Flynn had no trouble in routing out a good-sized demijohn of whiskey from among his blankets. Without waiting to refill the

empty bottle from his pocket, he at once tipped the jug to his licking lips and guzzled heavily. Having so reënforced himself, he altruistically proffered the simple beaker to young Rafe Doerck.

On the ground before them, mute and immobile, my poor girl crouched in an unplumbable abysm of panic.

Could this be she — she in very deed? Was it — *could* it be — the same girl of that radiantly complex September morning, ready to leave her pastoral honeymoon joy for the other duties of her dear New England home — a true wife, with the old lucky Norman wedding-ring on her finger? *Could* it be? And here, now — without one second's warning — swept miles away from all those who so loved and cherished her — hid in a terrible underground chamber — unutterably helpless, tied hand and foot, at the mercy of ghouls, impossibly cunning and implacable! Irony of ironies — O tragic weird! Could there be still any further blow beyond this?

She did not know whether it was more relief or despair that seized upon her when Doerck contemptuously repulsed the jug. Very likely she was too far sunk in blackness for any new tinge of feeling whatsoever. Yet, slavishly, her eyes must follow each infinitesimal move on the part of her dread masters.

And there could be no mistake as to Doerck's spurning of the demijohn. "Get out!" he said, roughly waving the offer away.

"Oh, all right," grumbled Whiskey, elaborately bowing. "Ex-cuse me, bucko. *All* right! But if you got no blasted objection — hey?" He swigged again, carefully corked the jug and put it down. Then his blood-streaked eyes hungrily sought Eloise.

The drunken things which spewed from that filthy pariah mouth may be imagined by those who have the hardihood for such exercise. It amounted, in the up-shot, to a magnanimous proposal to young Doerck. They would toss a coin.

"Sure, I'll just flip you, boy, I will!" the carrion loyally protested.

"No, will you, now?" enquired Doerck; and the quality of his voice made Eloise's suffocating heart bound. It penetrated, even — that special edged voice quality — to Whiskey's sodden brain.

But the middle-aged rat was not without his rat's spirit. He showed fight on the dot.

"I said I will, didn't I?" he hiccoughed. "I said so, and by God Almighty, it goes! Does that suit you? 'Cause, if it don't —"

"If it don't — what?" propounded young Rafe Doerck again.

Whiskey burst into a torrent of cursing.

"What?" he yelled. "*What?*" He thrust his crimson-mottled face forward. "She's mine — that's what! I'll take her by rights. Hey? I'll take her 'cause I'm the best man. I'll take her. . . . Didn't she crack me through the leg that night, there, at the old shack? What! Didn't she? Don't I have to get my revenge? Hey? I'd have taken her first, wouldn't I, if we'd ketched onto her that other dam' night?"

"Oh, you would, would you?" — so, for the third cynical time, queried Rafe Doerck.

By the wavering flame of the candle, all but lost in that dense cupola of shadow, Flynn staggered closer and peered with his loose red eyes into the stare, grim and slightly askew, of the unblinking boy.

"You ain't aiming to cross me none, Rafe, are you?" he demanded. "I'm sure a bad crittur when I'm crossed."


Doerck shot out a hand and dealt him a violent push. "Get away. And keep out of my sight for a while, if you know when you're well off. I ain't just decided about you yet."

The veined-nosed ruffian reeled from the shove. But either he had a better native courage than I would have suspected, or he had poured it into him from the jug. Doerck must have looked a pretty formidable young person, at that moment. And Whiskey was easily fifty-five to sixty years old. However, a gun covers many spans. With a scream of fury, Whiskey reached for his.

It was no season for debonair risks, and the agate-eyed boy took none. A hurtling rush, and he had his elderly compadre in his arms; and they went to the ground together. The tangled and kicking sprawl they made was all that could be seen.

Whiskey, though, had managed to get his gun out and cocked; and it exploded in the scuffle now with a deafening roar. Eloise heard the big bullet chug and spatter into the cave-wall somewhere high above her head. The reverberating din of the report in that solid-arched chamber was racking; and the burning powder added its one more ill touch to the already sufficient combination of smells.

Flynn's .44 slug had gone wild astray, of course; and he and Doerck, both perfectly unhurt, wrestled and clawed about over the hard-packed earthen floor like a pair of terriers in the death-lock of a pit. Oaths, grunts, sobbing breaths, came thick and fast from



Whiskey. Doerck, powerfully extending himself, was silent as the grave. Suddenly a flung-out arm or leg dashed down the candle-end from the low rock ledge where it had been stuck, and the cave fell pitchy black.

Now, certainly, if ever in the tottering world — now was certainly Eloise's cue for escape; and she did her frantic best. But the thrice-accursed robber of a boy had lashed her tired limbs too well. By no shift or exertion could she do more than roll a couple of futile yards toward the cave entrance.

Poor hope! It was soon gone. The cords bit deep into wrist and ankle. Still she tugged on. Only, quite without hope.

The crooks' tussle, all told, did not last a great while. Manifestly, it would take that savage boy no wasteful time to wrench the six-shooter out of Whiskey's impotently straining grip. Through the dark echoed the thud of half a dozen resounding kicks in the ribs. Then a sulphur match spirted. With the match's aid, Doerck raked about over the churned ground till he had found the candle, and quietly relighted it.

So! The faint yellow tip of illumination disclosed Whiskey Flynn hazily sitting in mid-floor, aimlessly feeling over himself with swollen shaky fingers. He was dishevelled and dirty from the wallowing; a happy thing to see. Slowly and groaningly he rose to his feet; spied the demijohn; cast himself gulpingly on it and took an immense heartening pull. But this trip, though the precious vessel still contained considerable more liquor, he did not bother to cork it when he had released it from his mouth. For a long moment he stood dumbly staring, balanced on his heels, painfully

working out some idea in the alcoholic confusion of his brain. Then, lifting the stone jug high above his head, he charged insanely for Eloise.

"What!" he howled at the boy. "So I can't have her — what, hey? All right, devil! All right! But maybe I can spoil her whey-faced slut's good looks a little for you! —"

His intention was plain as day. Eloise lay cramped and wooden on her side, just where she had ceased rolling in the miserably inglorious effort to escape. She saw the demijohn in the maniac's hand, cumbrously poised, ready to descend on her skull.

Well, so be it, then. That, at least, would save her. Almost acquiescently, almost gratefully, she shut her eyes for the crash.

But — no crash came. Or, at any rate, not the one she had expected.

Somewhere above her there *did* seem to be a splintering impact; and the fragments of the broken jug scattered down about her, and the raw pungency of spilt rum cut the air. One agonized shriek there was too, perhaps; and the rapid shuffle and grip of coarse feet on the ground directly beside her. Briefly my horror-stupefied girl opened her weighted lids a hair's-breadth, and peeped up. Doerck had Flynn by the throat with his left hand. With his right, he was whipping a two-edged hunting-knife again and again into the convulsed body. They were so near that Eloise could sharply detect the ring of the knife-blade when it hit on a rib or the breast-bone and glanced off.

Shudderingly she drew her lids together; though not that this would blot out the picture at all. However, nothing really mattered. She was by now so steeped

in abominations — one more or less could make no possible difference. Lying huddled and twisted on her side, with her face pressed into the dry earth, she simply waited.

Flynn's body, she automatically noted, did not drop on her, or beside her, as she had thought it would. Doerck must have continued to hold it up. Very soon the boy's planted feet moved heavily away from her neighborhood toward the involved mouth of the cave. Carrying Whiskey outright in his arms, he must be now. Eloise, in fact, never saw the middle-aged drunkard's carcass again, nor even knew what had become of it, till much later. Neither did any of our persistent mountain-combers happen to stumble on it in their weavings that fall.

To-night Doerck was not long gone from the cave. Meanwhile — amid the blood, the alcohol, the ragged débris of the demi-john — Eloise lay quite still. She heard the boy presently re-enter, and could feel him standing above and looking fixedly down on her. She turned her head and met his eyes full. But for the slight squint in the right one (and the general malignity of expression, of course), he had rather exceptionally swagger eyes; large, prominent, glittering, dark.

"That's the only hombre I've ever walked into, so far," he vouchsafed, after a smoldering minute. He tightened; hunched up his hulking shoulders; seemed positively to spit venom. "But is it going to be the last? *Is* it? You'd better believe not! I'm just beginning, kid. There's a lot more of 'em going to travel that road, before I'm through."

Brokenly my darling besought him. "You've been

so fine and generous. You've protected me. Oh," she begged, "won't you set me free? "

His gaze on her was very intent, very appraising, very interested. But the cold red lips curled with a sardonic and forbidding grin.

"Set you free? Oh, sure! After scuttling old Whiskey that careless way, and risking my own fool neck. I work and plan like a nigger all summer to get you, and then — squeak, squeak, — 'Oh, please, mister!' — and the jig's up. May-be! Little mouse's gone, little bird's flew the coop. May-be! Wouldn't that be nice, now? An easy, soft, safe-under-cover bet! And slam — squeak, squeak — there she goes, clean chucked away!"

Without comment on her obvious try at escape, he stooped and picked her up out of the litter of rum-smelling crockery, and lifted her back to her old sitting position against the rock-wall. She saw Whiskey Flynn's big blue revolver lying dully aglint on the dirt floor. No doubt it was with that Doerck had smashed the jug, throwing it as a missile from the hand. Even inside the cave, one shot, at this ticklish juncture, was already well more than enough.

When the boy had put her — his sick and trembling prey — down against the wall, he went triumphantly on, still obsessed rather with the flare of his first murder than with any primary thought of the captive woman.

"Nosirree, I ain't done with my string of killings yet, kid. *Done?* Well, I reckon not. And say! Don't you ever go making none of them bad mistakes about me. Set you free? Listen. I'm out for myself, I am. What I want, I climb after, I rustle after.

And I don't stop till I get her, neither, and for keeps. I don't split with no pals, mind."

Could there be a way of reaching that brazen vandal heart? Of touching it?

"Why, you're so—so young!" cried Eloise. "You can't be older—can you?—than I—"

"I don't know how old you are," he struck in brutally. "And, what's more, I don't care a whoop! You *look* good and right—that's plenty O. K. for me. I've had my claim-stake drove in on you from the first crack I see you." He paused, flickering down his evil and exultant, yet curiously self-contained, grin on her. "Old? I don't savvy how old I am myself, kid, if that'll help you out any. It ain't the custom in my family to run sniveling around among the neighbors, telling your brat's birthday. Not with *my* sainted mammy—nosirree-bob, it wasn't. She was too sweet and bloody glad to forget all about me!" He paused again, impressed by the chance. Clearly he was finding himself in the exploits of this skyrocket night. "Say! How would you like to hear about that slippery brown bitch of a madre of mine?"

It might mean another breath of time. My girl murmured—"Yes."

"Well, it won't take a week. And we got all night. I ain't had nobody but Whiskey Flynn to chin to for an age. And I kind of feel like talking to-night. Wait, though, till I twist myself a cigarette." He glanced questioningly at his grimy brown-splotched paws. "I reckon I sure ought to wash some of the gore off them hands. Which I sure ain't a-going to do, just the same. It'll help flavor the tobacco."

Dropping down to the ground before her, he rolled

and lighted the quick cigarette; then lapsed into his pretty reminiscence.

"I was born in Durango, Mexico, but Texas is all I can remember. My sainted old lady was a Mexican fancy woman, see? And more bad than fancy too, I reckon, if everything they shoot off about her down there along the line ain't dead lies. Dolores Flores, she called herself. My sainted old man, whoever *he* was, never toed up to the scratch very strong. He might have been anybody that was around North Mexico just then, you savvy. Of course the madre ups and blames me on her best card. I ain't kicking none on that, you can go the limit. Some day I'm mighty liable to hunt up my rich caballero of a Chihuahua grand-daddy." He inhaled deeply. "What do you say, baby? Ain't she a bull of a story?"

My poor darling moaned something which, in its distress, evidently satisfied his vanity; and he went on.

"Yes, according to the hombre that Dolores pointed out, my old man was sure a swift lot. But rich — rich as a stinking Jew! His daddy owned a forty-mile ranch, and the greatest mining and hardware store in the whole state of Chihuahua. He was one of them damned snarling Dutchmen — Grand-dad Señor Adolph was. Everybody hated him. Maybe he's still alive. My old man Otto never done anything himself but sport and gamble and drink champagne. So that got him the blame for me, see? And for a wonder, maybe, if the madre ever really did know herself, she was telling the truth about me. You can spot in a holy second I'm no straight Mex. With your own bright eyes, kid, can't you? Anyway, it's all right. The priests cornered padre Otto, and collected a little

cache of pesos for me, and give me his rich name."

Then came an extraordinary naïve burst of pride, of sheer filial vainglory.

"Understand me, though, you, not that my mammy Dolores was any of your common half-nigger and half-Indian peon runts. *Her?* You're whistling — not!" Promptly he switched back into sulky normal again. "But there — hell! I can't be expected to savvy very blamed much about her, hey, can I? When she farmed me out from the minute I was born? And never let me see her once after that — curse her yellow bat's soul!"

He snapped away the cigarette and restlessly scrambled up to his feet.

"All the same, they still talk big of her — Dolores Flores — down there in Chihuahua and Durango. A sassy bull-fighter's beauty they say she was; pure Spanish, tall and swaying and fiery. The funny part of it is that she lived so long. For she must have been every bit of thirty before the worst-jealous of her flock of ranchero lovers ripped out on her one night, in a Torreon dance-hall. Hacked her nigh about to pieces, then, though, he did. And listen — my giddy grab-bag Dutchman of an old man, too! *He* went the next Easter after I was born, the story goes, in a Chihuahua thieves' alley. They split that hot champagne throat of his — oh, like a fried spring chicken! So I'm a poor suffering orphan, kid, ain't I? And queer I sort of lean toward a knife myself. I didn't savvy I did till to-night. Looks as if you had to run true to breed, hey — wouldn't you swear?"

That strain of abandoned Mexican blood in the beast explained him startlingly. I had never thought to suspect it: he absolutely did not show Mexican in appear-

ance. Among other things, though, it probably accounted for his precocity. Still, I question if he had been quite as wholesale advanced in bravado as this, even privately, at the beginning of the summer. The potentiality was of course there. But now he seemed to have jumped out into complete criminal flower, at a stride!

Not seldom lately, I am certain, have I been guilty of calling him a dog or a wolf or a rat or a swine. In reality, his outstanding animal quality, highly marked, was cat-like. With all his lustiness and size, he had something of the lazy disillusioned cat finesse, something of the fluid cat grace and stealth. His cheerful Latin mother again, beyond a hair of doubt. And abundantly — how he did have the cat temper! . . . But I speak as if I had picked up this final summary of him on sight!

More and more now, as he gazed down at Eloise by the dim candle-flicker in his vile cave — more and more did her favor in his cruel eyes mount. He had never actually had an unbroken fair look at her before. Her simple girlishness caught, affected, him.

"I'm going to be a gambler, see?" he suddenly confided, almost equally boyishly. "I'm going to change my name, and be a Coast gambler." From his top shirt pocket he slid out a couple of decks of scurvy cards. "And I'm going to hit the ceiling too, as soon as I'm onto all the games. You'll wear diamonds before you're through with me, kid." But he never could hold up at this or any relative human height very long. "Me? You just watch me, baby! I'm the same stuff as my hell-bent rip of a Spanish old woman. Sure! And I reckon they'll get me with my boots on, like

they got her and the flossy Dutch sport she said my old man. That's me! I expect it, kid. Let ' Only, I'm out to stay till the clean last throw, you your sweet soul! And they'll have to wake up, powerful devilish slick and early, hey? — and work *me pronto* — when they *do* get me, kid, I can tell 'e that!"

Always desperately clutching for one more crumb o respite, my darling stammered — "And so — then — then you're not an American? —"

He shrugged boastfully. "American? Bah! I'm nothing, that's what I am. I'm for myself, don't you hear? Texas! What the bloody blazes do I care about Texas? A Presidio County cinnabar miner took me away from the priests down there in Durango, and brought me up to his Marfa shack. He was stuck on Dolores. He'd blown in all his money on her — Sanderson — for years. He was stuck on her to the very day she cashed in, used to go down south there to see her. I reckon he took me for her sake. Anyway, he let me tag along after him on his trips to the Rio Grande, and things went pretty good. Till — bang! — one morning the rangers plugged him cold for hoss-stealing. So — adios, Sanderson! That turned me loose. I had to vamoose the ranch.

"After that — I was somewheres around six or seven then, maybe — after that they put me in charity places here and there. I always got away, though. Don't you worry, kid, I've lived plenty rough. But somebody mostly paid the shot for it. And I roped out a few odd scraps of schooling, off and on; and I've *seen* my share." With an air of wind-up, he filed the

smudgy cards back in his shirt pocket. "Well, now. How's that for about enough palaver, say?"

Passionately my hapless girl besought him. "Oh, do — *do* — have pity on me! Be generous. My father is dying. Let me go. I'll bless you forever."

With a sinister forefinger, the blackguard whelp pointed toward the shadowy roof of the cave. "Ain't my sainted ma, Dolores, up there blessing me all the time now? I don't want too many blasted women fussing around, blessing over me."

"Oh!" whispered Eloise.

"Listen here," Doerck proposed. "What's the matter with this? We'll be striking a safe town, after while. I don't register no objection to being married."

"*Married?*" wailed my girl. "You don't know! I *am* married."

"What!" His wicked slued eyes turned menacing, steely-cold. "To that smart-alec sissy-fingered clerk, hey? All right. You can soon forget him."

"Never, never — I shall never forget him — not while there's a spark of life! —"

To daunt her truth — as if he could ever have hoped to compass that! Her lifted voice (how my reeling brain can still seem to hear it!) echoed about in the grim arches of the underground chamber. On the rock ledge, the candle-stump was guttering to extinction. Doerck hesitated one juggling mental flash. Then he snatched out his hunting-knife and stooped.

"You'll never forget him — you?" he demanded. "Say! You actually love that sissy eastern dude? Like that, do you? Say! As much as all that?"

Eloise had no thought in the world but that he meant

to plunge the knife in her breast. "I love him with all my heart and soul and mind and strength!" she cried exaltedly.

The boy merely slashed the cords that bound her hands and feet.

"Now, then, you listen to me." He pronounced the words slowly and steadily, with a promise so quiet, so malign, that each syllable cut into her consciousness like the edge of his knife. "You're mine, see? And if ever you make so much as a move to try to skip away from me — no matter where or how, remember — if ever you do, I'll find this fellow out you love — no matter, I tell you, where or how that is — I'll find him out and down him in his tracks. Biff! In his tracks, see? I'll find him, you understand me, if it's in New York, or China, or at the North Pole. He won't escape none. I'll get him hard. You spotted Whiskey, right here. Well, that's how it'll be with your man. Just like that. Biff! I won't kill *you*. I'll kill *him*. Do you believe me?"

After a tiny breathless space, my girl said — "I believe you."

And so she did, and had every cause to. It was a masterly stroke — that — on the part of the loathsome outcast robber. He must have been immeasurably more clever than I had rated him. For in a single fell glance, it seemed, he was able to read to the bottom of this rare young creature's blind nobility of motive. Poor lost white pigeon, poor fateful sylvan bride! Now, truly, did he have her at his mercy.

The candle-flame spluttered quite out, and the cavern became a cavern in very deed. It was in the horrible black void that my darling made her ultimate appeal

to him. Twisting to her stiffened knees, she groped about with her hands, numb in the inky blank, till she had fastened on his.

"Let me go! How can I entreat you? For the sake of another!—"

"Oh, sure!" came back the sneering voice from above. "Other? That lily-livered clerk, maybe?"

"No! Not my husband."

"Well? You say your old man is dying. What's the good of worrying about him?"

"Please, please! It's not any man! It's — it's — myself!"

"You?"

"Oh, have pity! Have pity on me! I'm not alone with you here. I think — there's another little life. . . ."

That confession! How many million times have I in vain tried to fancy it to myself — and fought, fought, against the trying!

Even out there under the glistening stars, where anything is possible between a man and a woman — no, not even alone with me out there in the ineffable cleanliness had she shared her shining mystery. Not by so much as a flush of the cheek; by so much as a new tell-tale shyness in the eye. Probably — it *must* have been that — my senses were too gross for the maiden messages she sent. Certainly, certainly, I didn't, *couldn't* know! . . .

And now! Not I, not her mate, not her lover! But he! . . .

How the fearful details will persist in setting themselves out all stark and orderly before me. That delicate-spirited young girl — her first halting avowal

(it may have been to her own very soul) of the divine fulfillment! So — in this poisonous black cave — to those deaf ears — to that nauseous misbegotten deep-damned reptile! . . .

“Remember!” was all his answer to her pleadings. “You make just one flicker of a try at getting away, and I’ll duck back and let out that fellow’s breath. With his smoking heart’s blood, mind. If it’s the last trick I ever turn in the world.” In the pitchy dark he was still holding on to her hand. “Here, what’s this?”

She tried to wrench her hand away from him, but he was miles too strong. Roughly he tore my old “lucky” Norman ring off her third finger!

“Matt, Matt!” she called wildly.

Viciously he jerked the wedding-ring away from him back into the hollow recesses of the cave. The swish of his arm brushed her face. Strainingly she listened for the little sound of the metallic fall, but could detect nothing.

My ring — gone! Even that — the symbol — gone!

CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH

LAFE DUKE, GAMBLER

All that night, and all the next day, they remained close in the cave. Doerck tied Eloise's hands and feet again while he slept. For the rest, she was free enough to move about within the confines of the gloomy rock walls.

They had no more candles, and the boy would not think of risking a fire; so that the dark of the long stretch of night hours was absolute. During the day, a wisp of ghostly gray light did contrive to filter in; far from actually sufficient to see by. They must have had some rude old camp grub to eat, too; though this, or the lack of it, would never trouble my poor broken girl.

Mine? . . . I know what the averted-eyed would say to that. Mine, in any accepted bridegroom sense, to be sure, I could scarcely now call her. . . . *Could* I not? None the less, by God, I *do* call her so. Mine! Then as always — mine alone! The skies might topple — ay, they *had* toppled — full on us. The pit might yawn. At least I still had the kind of right to her — the kind no foul material pillager could ever hope to destroy!

One brief spinning revolution of the earth — so — endured in the animal-reeking underground cell, presided over by that hideous token of the blackness! To even a moderately calloused woman (to *any* sentient

female creature) — what it would mean — such violence, such bludgeoning! In our drawing-rooms and laboratories we talk blithely of the cave primitive. . . . *Mean!* And to my beautiful tender girl — she, with her delicate nurture, her unspotted aloofness, her passion of exaltation, her slim exquisiteness of a flower! . . .

Wait. How can a decent man dare to enquire into the madness of these things? How, indeed? *I* dare not.

But she — my darling? . . . Just as she had never faltered for the breath of an instant in her abandonment to her love, so she did not now, in this crucifixion of experience, falter in what she conceived to be her loyalty and duty. It was the same impossibly magnificent recklessness. Somehow, between two beats of her heart, as it were, she had had to decide. And she had asked for no dalliance, no compromise. She was born to tragedy. That came of itself — by accident. Heaven had so decreed it. And this — this, then, was to be the last. Her love! A price had been put on her love.

Once that point was admitted, why, it had never occurred to her to waver. What matter as to the revolting horror of the price? The lover — he was to be saved. "Your man," promised Doerck. "In his tracks." Love — the last! Well, she would pay, to her uttermost.

And so, there it was. Tragedy or none, she had given herself to life. She did not understand. But humbly she acquiesced in the prerogative of her mistress to turn the screws.

Her wedding-ring she did now feverishly search about

for, raking over the murky ground and stones with spread aching fingers whenever chance offered. Chance so little offered, though; and, against her, the irregular crannied cave was large and involved and black. Not a sign of her treasure could she find. Destiny, too, had swallowed that up.

For Doerck, I must declare of him that he did not treat her brutally in any minor way; did not strike her with his murderous hands, or anything of the sort. In fact, in so far as such an unimaginable devil could be considerate under such circumstances, he was considerate. His real fondness for this pale and submissive ravished bride seemed to grow hour by hour.

It fell nothing short of a grotesque and bitter grievance with him, before the end, that he could not honestly marry her! *There*, if you will, was a tribute to the soul! Her truth, her strange romantic expressive simplicity and fervor of devotion, had captivated him, the thief, just as it had already captivated us, the miscellaneous other trio of her western excursion — Scaramouch and Glendenning and me.

At the coming on of the second night, the boy roused her up and started her out on their furtive travels. He covered all the tracks they left at the cave with extraordinary care and craftiness. His pains (not to say his skill) in this shrewd business was inordinate. They had few traps, and took away fewer. What Doerck could make no shift to carry readily himself (he weighted Eloise with barely a trivial couple of pounds), he hid. Before the lightening of the next dawn, my girl realized — now almost with a dreadful thankfulness — that a dozen more rocky miles had been placed between herself and me.

Doggedly and wearily, this same second night, Scaramouch and I were systematically scouring peak and gulch, ridge and valley. But our humanly imperfect scrutiny happened not to take us anywhere near them. They had no bother on that score from us at all. By the third morning, they were snugly ensconced in another safe hiding-place among the remoter rocks.

This wayfaring day, Doerck ventured to build a small fire. It was a miracle the smoke did not betray them. But the boy knew his stunt. He used only fine, dry, bleached sticks, which meant there would be next to no smoke; that little drifting away practically lost among the towering gray chimneys of rock. With a bit of scouting about, also, he ran into a covey of spruce grouse (or fool-hens), and managed to knock a pair over without having to shoot off his gun.

So they made a real camp this second morning of the flight, and roasted their fat birds comfortably against the quick bright flame of their fire, and had plenty of water to drink. Then Doerck spread the blankets on a convenient bed of pine litter, and tied Eloise again, and they lay quiet all day.

That was a typical stage of their long journey. And we did not come up on them, then or later, as already you know. Northwestward they worked away out of our reach; softly, charily; by easy marches; traveling at night and sleeping mostly during the light hours of the day. When in anything approaching real danger, ticklishness — and it happened, believe, now and again! — they simply held very still.

Only by a persistent, cold and resourceful effort was this completeness of success won. Doerck truly earned

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it. He must have. It marked the beginning of the almost uncanny aptitude he showed for adroit and ingenious twists. At the Swallowfork home-ranch, and afterward at the lamb-station, he had impressed me as being merely a stalwart barbarous cub with one crossed eye; instinctively vicious; rather silent, beside some of the other loose-mouthed fools, yet not especially notable even for that.

He certainly never seemed to me to contain unusual potentialities. What is more to the point, I don't think Bull Dorgan felt that he did; though I may, of course, be mistaken there.

Now, however, the condemned young pirate was unarguably going strong. Perhaps it had needed the spoiling of a woman and the murder of his pal to call out his happy latent powers. At any rate, from this one, he became an indubitable man to be reckoned with. The big maneuvering cat in him leapt stealthily to the fore.

First and last, during those padded fugitive days, whenever he had an unemployed minute, he was busy practicing with his grimy cards. Sitting Indian-wise on a blanket tossed on the ground, he would endlessly finger and shuffle and deal. Throughout the summer too, I learned, he had been playing assiduous saloon cards in the dens of Rainbow. Already he seemed to have wriggled far enough into the mazes of crooked gambling to have picked up a little bag of dealer's tricks; and in these, day after day, for hours at a session, he would patiently school himself. His mind, I have to admit, was positively not slow. He sensed and assimilated what was going on about him with a mighty fair acumen.

Nor, if you could put by the ineradicable stamp of evil on him, was he ill to look at. The eye-cast, being so slight, could soon be got round. And later on in the winter, when (under the disguise of a boyish vandyke beard and the name of Lafe Duke) he took to grooming and dressing himself with some flash gambler's pretentiousness, he achieved a rather considerable reputation. He won the name of a handsome young buck. And this in quarters no less flamboyant and cosmopolitan, either, than the sporting circles of San Francisco and New Orleans!

The facts, in a word, proved him capable of giving an excellent tenderloin account of himself. He stood above six feet in height. His face, though low-browed and dark, had nothing of the semi-negroid Mexican opacity. He was the olive-skinned sort, with that prominent glitter of eye, and a mouth red and clean-cut. Plenty of his stock's feline grace he had also, to repeat; and more than a touch of the engaging vigorous dash and color which always seem to go with the unbridled. Women, of a type, flocked to him.

But — in my enthusiasm, I outstrip myself. We are not yet ready for most of these ingratiating items in his heroic make-up. The recognition of them would come several months later in his life. For the time being, his consistent ability to evade us and the constituted authorities of the sovereign territory of Montana was what suffered to etch him out. He had shamed us, utterly. And with apparent ease.

Naturally, the constituted authorities of the sovereign territory of Montana were not nearly so well organized then as they are now, in the twentieth-century commonwealth. In 1884 the bona fide "wild"

days of the West had more or less agreeably faded into history and the pyrotechnic past. An occasional desperado would still crop up and briefly flourish, and an occasional Vigilance Committee. But straight orthodox law was rapidly taking over the function of the stranglers. The county sheriff and the town marshal had become significant men. You will hardly have to be told all that.

It was only, indeed, on the extreme outlying fringes of things that such a series of villainies as these I have so laboriously been trying to restate and clear up, could now be played through to so successful an issue. Only on the far mountain skirts of the isolated Pinto Basins.

And yet, what do I say? My very next words must refute me. For here was the cheerful crime acolyte, Master Rafe Doerck! As late anyway as the fall of '84, the sheep-herder demonstrated that, by deft handling, a campaign of terror could be carried tolerably close to one of the big central frontier towns. He did it, single-handed.

However, to sum up.

From the night of the twenty-sixth of September, then, to the middle of October, Eloise and her strapping whelp of an abductor traveled steadily. "Skulked," is rather the word. Hide-and-seek. My poor girl was wearing men's crass clothes again these touch-and-go days; though they were always careful to pack her woman's dress along with them, too. Somewhere on the lonely route, Doerck had warily pried himself into a miner's shack that was barred up for the winter, and had stolen the masculine gear they needed, as also whatever else he saw which took his errant fancy. But what they needed most, of course, as they fetched

farther and farther away from us, and could show themselves with increasingly less chance of detection, was money.

Adventure! Nothing involves money, one shortly discovers, like professional adventure. There was the crux. Money!

For Doerck seemed to possess literally not a sou. This hunting trip had emptied him, to the dregs. And how could he expect to put into any regular gambling-house town without a pocketful of dinero? He couldn't. No, at least a *little* stake of that highly useful chip-buying commodity — well, he must have it. Therefore, like the unfaltering new spirit he had now blossomed out into, he resorted to a device; a something less than original device, perhaps, yet perfectly efficacious and direct. And he acquitted himself with brilliance.

They had dropped quite down out of the thick of the mountains by this; were on the long northern coach roads. One afternoon in mid-October, while lying covert, they spied a spanking six-horse coach roll by in a cloud of dust not a quarter of a mile off in the gleaming autumnal distance.

"Hey!" muttered squinting Rafe Doerck to himself, thoughtfully.

The sight of the six smartly trotting cayuses, the big swinging Concord (with its bulging fore and aft boots), the clustered inside passengers' heads at the window, the other two more untrammelled passengers swaying aloft on the box with the driver — all this evidently burned itself into the boy's crook brain on the instant. His German-Mexican red lips curled. Money? You could see the poison tingling, mounting,

taking hold. He was ready. Almost before the coach had disappeared behind its yellow-gray dust streamers to the south, he had set his powder in train for the morrow.

First and mainly, that is, he found the right place. He did not have to search far, yet nothing could have been more to the Jack Sheppard purpose. The road, at a point, wound in among sharp volcanic hills, through a bit of barren rocky defile. It was the exact spot.

That night they camped well back off the highway, very secretly, building no fire. Eloise took what came, as she took the sparkling October air. Except about eminently practical details, which it would be awkward for her to suspect and about which he never seemed to make any mistake, the accursed fellow was often rather kiddish and communicative with her, his undemanding Sabine woman. Before the light failed, this present afternoon, he had her fashioning a business like black mask for him out of a piece of coat lining.

"Now you're going to see some real life, missus," he boasted. "*Real* life, mind! A one-man coach hold-up! How's that for a starter, say? Well, I reckon! This here is where Lafe Duke, gambler, gets his little old feet wet. Are you listening, you? This here is where Lafe Duke gets born, you savvy? — and christened, and throws himself clean loose, all in the same big bull-ring slam! Is that what? But maybe, if they behave, I won't have to plug nobody."

Was my darling able by now to talk with the wretch on any kind of human terms? Or on any kind of terms whatsoever? That would be manifestly impossible. But he was such a profound egoist — it did

not matter. Her entire submissiveness to his general mastery must have been quite enough to satisfy him. . . . O heaven — enough!

Knowing her, it seems to me I can almost grasp something of her position in the hideous psychology of those prolonged weeks of open-air wandering together. Or no — that is beyond reason. The man does not breathe who could sound the intricacies of such day-by-day sacrifice. Certainly not the man for whom the sacrifice was day by day being renewed! . . .

No, better chuck all that. The utmost I can hope to do, is just to relate the order of the external facts, which spun themselves out fairly logical and plain. My girl was suffering the while very little commonplace hardship. They had plenty to eat and drink, and the necessary clothes and blankets (stolen though these might be) to shield themselves against the glorious clear cool weather. Eloise's health kept uniformly good.

But as to where she was, topographically — of that she never had the shadow of a notion. Nor, so long as she did not entertain any faintest intention of trying to run away, could it matter at all. Places, whether here or there, concerned the fortunate of the world. . . .

Once this day, in speaking of the big swinging Concord they had seen in the distance, Doerck casually alluded to it as the "Benton" coach. Fort Benton that would be, of course. Ah, a far cry now, veritably, from her old dear happiness and us! Summer — the gulch! . . . As to the other terminal of the coach line, she could not have offered a guess. It might be Helena or Timbuctu.

The next noon wore round; and Doerck, accoutered in his home-made black mask, led Eloise away to a niche in the rocks above the road, and unhurriedly settled her there; high up, where she would be thoroughly out of reach; yet so, too, that she could neatly overlook and appreciate all the points in the bandit enterprise. However, he was no trustful person — young Doerck. He took the precaution of securely lashing her, hands and feet, to her screened safety; and even thrust a beastly gag into her mouth, silent and uncomplaining as he must by this have known her to be. Still, in one-man road-agenting, he doubtless figured, you should not complicate the natural hazards of the game with flights of gallantry.

Everything was arranged, the way paved, in ample time. Eloise saw the tall rocking wagon come rattling along on its course through the brisk air, entering the little craggy defile of stones a wheel ahead of the pallid swirl of alkali dust. The sun shone. Despite herself, her heart stilled with trepidation.

But steadily the coach swung on and on — near — opposite — past! Without a sign of challenge, it came and went. Unhindered, it disappeared, with a careless lurch, at the southern end of the broken ravine; the driver calmly curling out the long silken popper of his ferruled whip over the horses' backs.

Eloise wondered. Had her new-turned gambler and gentleman of the road — the ex-lamb-smacker — had he suddenly lost his vaunted nerve?

Presently he strode up to her cover among the rocks, and ungagged and unbound her.

"Only one passenger to-day," he explained grimly. "Maybe we'll pull better cards to-morrow."

The unhallowed young miscreant! He knew what he wanted, absolutely definitely. He did not mean to loot the coach. He wanted money; cash; actual coin of the realm, as it would be carried, in probably large quantities, in the wallets and gold-belts of the individual passengers. That was the system he afterward used to gamble on; sticking at nothing; yet never taking a superfluous hair of chance.

So next day the whole program of the binding and gagging must be scrupulously repeated. But this trip there fell no hitch in the cardinal adventure. It was a raw, ashen, windy afternoon to-day; the sky bleak and overcast. Nevertheless, seven heavily over-coated passengers were distributed about over the cold-looking coach, inside and out.

Eloise's heart slowed again with the primitive suspense. The three lengths of free-trotting horses swept down opposite the place where Doerck had skillfully cached himself away among the roadside rocks. Then — zip — a rifle-shot cracked abrupt and curt through the whistling channel of chill air. The off leader of the six hustling trotters, a bay, went to earth like a meteor; a dragging sprawl in a gruesome tangle of harness!

Up on the box to-day, the driver was a boy, hardly older than Doerck himself. All the same, he seemed to understand the technique of such a whimsical occasion perfectly. Cursing, he jammed on the brake and jerked his five living horses, startled and quivering, but quite manageable, back on their tails.

"Get up your hands!"

From behind his rock barricade (it sheltered him from the coach utterly), Rafe Doerck gruffly vented

that ancient titillating stencil of the profession. And nobody there but instantly comprehended and obeyed. The boy driver, still gloomily cursing, made haste to wrap his reins about the brake-post.

"Turn out, everybody!" further commanded crisp master-of-ceremonies Doerck. "Tumble down. On this side the road. And be damned quick about it. Stand in a row."

The seven passengers and the driver, compliant to that harsh disembodied voice (the dead leader was there on the ground to argue they did not have to do with a mere mocking and lightsome spirit), ranged themselves alongside the coach, hands uncomfortably raised. Doerck, black-masked and muffled in his blanket overcoat, a hulking formidable figure, the cocked Winchester at his left shoulder, lifted up from among the rocks.

Not speaking, he advanced to within twenty feet of the grotesque line of straining men.


"Bunch up, there — closer together!" he said, in his hoarse disguised voice. "But so I can spot every hand every second of the time." They disposed themselves to his autocratic liking. "That's it. Now, then, driver. Your play."

"*How* is it my play?" growled the boy reinsman at the end of the line, disdainfully.

"You go through the gang for me."

The unimpressed young driver (a short fattish lad) swelled with indignation. "*Me?* Go through my passengers? For a blasted hold-up?" He swore violently. "Not me, Johnnie!"

In comment on this, Doerck's Winchester simply spat out again, savagely, the bullet plowing its jagged way



through the profane boy's hat-brim, not an inch above his ear, and chugging viciously into the coach-body behind him. Click-clack! Lightning-like, the desperado in front snapped another cartridge into the breech, and waited a telling trice. The admonished driver, his hands still raised, swallowed convulsively several goes at the not unreasonable lump in his throat.

"Have you got a gun on you?" Doerck asked next.

"Yep."

"Lower one hand and get it out, and drop it on the ground. Mind, I'm watching you. And my trigger-finger's mighty nervous."

Very carefully, the other boy shifted down his left hand, unbuttoned his overcoat, unbuckled the gun-belt from about his waist and let it fall.

"Anything more?" suggested Doerck.

"Nope."

"All right. I'll take your word for it. Now, then — jump into work on them hombres."

"But," sturdily persisted the round-faced boy, "this ain't the thing. It ain't regular — it ain't! It makes me look like a crook, too."

"Maybe you'd sooner look like a corpse?" Doerck enquired. "Suit yourself. I'll count three."

"Well, say what you want me to do," dismally mumbled the driver.

"I just want you to go through these here wealthy transient parties. That's all. Being so alone, I have to call on a friend in a pinch that way. But I don't want nothing else from you, and I don't want no rings or watches from anybody. See? Only the guns and the money. It better be a lot of money, though."

The apple-cheeked boy made one final wry face. "I

might as well skip the country, or go to rustling cattle, after this!"

"Are you ready?" barked Doerck.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Begin on the man next you. Put down both your hands. Work from the side, and face me. At the first whisper of a slip, you're gone. All you others — hike them hands up, there. Stretch! Now."

Clumsily unbuttoning his passengers' thick overcoats, the boy off the box felt rapidly about over the persons of the seven men of them, tossing down in a pile on the ground the guns and pocketbooks and money-belts as fast as his reluctant fingers encountered any such. Doerck, in the black mask, kept extremely sharp track of all this. The passengers wisely offered no resistance, but shuffled to and fro in the operation at the dictator's clipped bidding, letting themselves be shorn without a murmur, their open hands stiffly propped in the windy air.

When the last man of the row had been accounted for, Doerck nodded to his assistant. "All right. Good! I reckon maybe you've missed something here and there. But that's enough for me. Throw up your hands again. And hang straight on as you are — so — the whole wrestled outfit of you."

Then, not attempting to pick up any of the plunder off the ground, the maiden road-agent cautiously backed away to his former concealment among the rocks, of course keeping the stage people punctiliously covered with his rifle all the while. It was a clever move, for there might well have been further arms — a Winchester or a shotgun — inside the coach or up on the box. Arrived at his mark, Doerck halted and

flattened down behind the impenetrable rock barricade again.

And, almost simultaneously, the staccato order rang out.

"Into the coach with you! Everybody — inside. Not you, driver. And you needn't hold up your hands any more — none of you."

He had them on the hip; beautifully, consummately. They could not even *see* him! And the dead sprawled leader was still out ahead there, to prove his own shooting quality. If a man among them had stooped an inch toward his property on the ground, it would most certainly have been that man's ultimate gesture in the world. One by one, the whole seven bulky figures crowded up into the body of the coach, the flustered last slamming to the door behind him. Only the boy driver remained sulkily standing on the ground.

"Cut loose that downed leader," signaled Doerck. "And mizzle!"

The apple-cheeked boy did not waste any time. He solved the evil snarl of harness, as Doerck had indicated, with his clasp-knife; kicking the out-of-commission double-trees to one side and bringing his unmated leader back and tying him on behind the boot. The horses, though restive, had behaved pretty well throughout; being more or less solidly anchored, to be sure, by the carcass of the dead leader.

"Silk now!" advised the forbidding voice from behind the rocks.

And, with a farewell vindictive mutter of curses, the young driver grabbed up his whip and reins, and wholeheartedly proceeded to "silk." In under five minutes, the big swinging Concord, now a four-horse vehicle,

with a jangling led-animal behind, had totally disappeared down the vista of the little stony ravine.

One pounce, after that, and Doerck was out on the road, snatching up his booty. Then, as swift and straight as he could make it, not even pausing to check over his haul, he climbed the spiny ledge to where he had left his pinioned onlooker, and tore her free from the degrading bondage. If he had been killed in the encounter below, she, so helpless, would of course have died equally of starvation and exposure up here. That meant nothing to him. You must expect to risk somewhat in the gayeties of "real" life! Now he rushed her away with him on the jump to their nearby two-night camp.

This had been, as always with them, a very Indian-like affair; veiled. To-day they stayed in it just long enough completely to obliterate all marks of their recent tenancy. The country roundabout was volcanically ragged and broken over a considerable area; and they pushed out into the auspicious roughness of mound and gully, away from the road, for several miles; never much exposing themselves; carrying only their prime necessities.

Soon Doerck, with his usual craft or luck, stumbled on to a fine saving nook among hillside rocks and scrub pines; and here they lay, undisturbed, through two gray wind-lashed days and one black night.

The spoils from the coach amounted, in money, to something in the neighborhood of three thousand dollars. A single fat wallet alone netted eighteen hundred. The guns, except one, an especially nifty, ivory-handled foreign make, Doerck filed away, in his characteristic thorough manner, in deep crevices of the rocks.

Though whistling cold, the weather was dry; and the scrub pines cunningly protected them from the worst of the wind. On the second day, they saw a pair of horsemen diligently scouring the district; but these seemed to be no more than the customary range-riding cow-punchers. Anyway, whatever they were, they went unsuspectingly on by.

Then Doerck readjusted their few traps; and gave the word; and again launched himself forth with his docile captive on their regulation, furtive, steadfast night travels. If they had gone charily before, how much more so would they now! To steal a strange woman out of a remote gulch was one thing. To stick up a mail coach on the friendly open roads was quite another. Due north, or practically, the young vandal bore from this time on, hot for the Canadian line.

That Benton-Helena coach hold-up must have been put through on about the exact day I was saying good-by to Scaramouch and Glendenning, with Doctor Duncannon in tow, at Piegan Springs. But we, of course, heard nothing of the excitement, immediately, down there.

Besides, Eloise had never distantly appeared in the matter, at best or worst; and the upper-country masked and muffled road-agent with the Winchester might have been anybody. So, without dream of the clew, I took my first sad and unwilling leave of the winter of our local comrades; and drove southward to Billings with my sick charge. Glendenning remained in Piegan. Scaramouch, on old Crow, morosely jogged back to the gulch.

But I have already endeavored to describe the passage of that futile winter with us.

Meanwhile, the new-christened Lafe Duke, gambler, and his girl prisoner, were industriously beating north, on foot, through the heavy wilds of the Milk River country. The Missouri they crossed somehow, in an old scow, picked up after much dark casting about along the dishevelled bluffs of the clay bank. Several moderately good flurries of snow overtook and hampered them. However, working west of the Bear Paw mountains, and fording the cold Milk River at a wade, they were eventually, by the first of November, to all frontier intents and purposes, clear of pursuit. It needed barely another spurt of effort to dodge safe across the international boundary on to Canadian soil.

Here their money, ill-garnered though some might think it, stood them in excellent proficient stead, as money of any stripe or color has a habit of doing. Nevertheless, Doerck still trod most, most, soft. Montana sheriffs had before this been known to slip across into the Saskatchewan for their strays.

But the black-souled Pinto boy held on, and played his preternaturally guarded and plausible game straight through to the finish. By the twelfth of November, the day we were lowering the last of poor Doctor Duncannon into his little snowy pit in the Maine churchyard, Lafe Duke and wife, as the word went now, were in British Columbia. Another week after that, and they had unostentatiously lost themselves among the flotsam citizenry of our own Pacific Coast capital.

Nobody noticed. It was just one more budding gambler and his wench come to town.

CHAPTER EIGHTEENTH

ROMANCE IN OLD NEW ORLEANS

San Francisco!

Ay, there in the sporting underworld of that western hive of the mongrel and shifting, American Mecca for many migrant oriental vices; passing as the wife of a felon and murderer; under a false name — there my darling came down into a kind of touch with civilization again. At least, she saw newspapers there. Home newspapers, even — Boston.

She read the account of her father's death, of the tremendous stir her own disappearance and probable death had caused in the New England collegiate circle. She searched out back numbers of the papers, and read and read. Doerck read also, and looked, intent and measuring, at her. Evidently he had by now learned of experience to trust her, grudgingly, yet fairly well; had gathered some faint hint of her quality. The only thing about her that could have served to trouble him at all (if anything about her could have served to trouble him) was the danger of suicide. . . . But he knew a way to curb her there.

In the Boston papers which Eloise read so avidly were news items (minor) devoted to my own incidental activities and whereabouts. Doerck did not neglect these. With sardonic care and circumstance, he recalled and elaborated all his old melodramatic threats against me. In this light of the news columns, he

pointed out — how easy to locate and, one thrust, to do for me!

As a simple matter of fact (though, to be sure, he would never have guessed that), my darling could not now have been dragged to me by locomotives. Indeed, if anything just at this moment could have tempted her to take her life, I believe, it must have been the fear of precisely such a chance.

However, as I reiterate, she was not, so far, thinking of doing away with herself. Doerck's attitude toward me covered all fields, avenues, of escape. Painstakingly he explained to her. If she tried to ditch him by absolutely *any* route — yes, on his mother's soul, if she so much as *tried* — I was gone! And no doubt he did mean the promise quite literally. He was natively bad. And, once having stretched his wings, the habit of cruelty had grown on him amazingly. Wayward he was, too; and the lust of blood rankled in him.

Of Eloise, though, he continued to be paradoxically, almost weakly, fond; of her pale beauty; of her mysterious nobility (it must have been unplumbably mysterious to him); of her dignified and innocent submissiveness. She could only reckon for her salvation on a day when he should no longer care whether she ran or not. And, in the course of nature, that critical day must soon begin to draw down. How could it be otherwise? She prayed without cease. Come, swift day! . . .

In December she was twenty years old. Twenty — out of her teens! Now, at last, by every standard, was she a woman. Dwelling among the fevers of "real" life! Mrs. Lafe Duke, dumb white hanger-on in that vile sink of a west coast capital; denizen of Chinatown; companion of thieves and monsters and drabs — she,

my inexpressibly dainty and pure-eyed girl! She, with the mother-spirit always mounting in her, hour by hour! . . .

It seemed incredible that there could yet be irony in store to bruise and shock her. Nevertheless, the ordeal of those first few weeks in San Francisco did. She staggered under them. Only, very fortunately, Doerck himself failed to take to the famous Golden Gate city with much sincerity of appetite. "Idiot!" his scowl as clear as said. Why had he ever hankered for such a hole?

The truth was, Master Squinting Rafe early waked here to find himself in deeps. He was camped down in the midst of a community of crooks seasoned to their various trades beyond the utmost his youth would have dared to dream practicable. You dealt a man cards — off the bottom, perhaps. Excellent! But meantime, that man also utilized the odd moment to pick your pocket! It was the boy's real initiation into the domain of crime by large professional groups; and, in spite of the best front he could put up, the prospect awed him. He had to feel each inch of his way mighty, mighty gingerly, with a straining watch before and behind, to the right and to the left. What esprit de corps, fraternal treachery! He was outraged, humiliated: a hunted look crept into his glittering dark eye. Gambler's paradise, eh? Under his breath, he cursed the whole crowded motley setting, with its Chinks and Hindus, its semi-oriental picturesqueness and dirt.

One afternoon he explained to Eloise that this was still a mite too uncomfortably near Montana for them. He had taken every thinkable precaution, certainly; could now even show a respectable swarthy shadow of

mustache and beard. All the same, he just *might* happen to stumble onto somebody here who would recognize him.

So, within three short weeks, he had decided to quit Frisco; to move on to likelier climes. Eloise, be sure, asking no questions, did not demur. It was soon after her birthday in December that they took train for the east, riding on the Union Pacific as far as the Mississippi River. There, at this majestic sweeping sign-board, potent with its frosty edging of ice, they turned south, leisurely traveling by packet to St. Louis; and thence on down by the bigger boats to New Orleans. Doerck tried out his tentative dirty cards in cabin and stateroom a goodish bit en route, and was better satisfied with himself.

On the eve of Christmas they arrived. . . . New Orleans. *New?* With its drowsing charm! And its old-world sense!

Eloise had never seen that Creole place before. And now, after the fantastic mad vice of San Francisco, the rawness, the violence — how her heart went out to this, at once! Behind these brooding thick-walled house-fronts she could meet her fate with some simple quietness. She blessed Doerck for establishing them so well away to the French side of Canal Street.

But he — Doerck — he trod firm ground here, made no more slips. Promptly, among the softer Latin peoples with whom the son of Dolores Flores could be congenially at home — promptly, to the forgotten hereditary nuance and gesture, did he strike his pace. It was to be his winter — this. He lost not a minute in getting started. They were brief joys. Still, they were joys. And they were his!

Well, that moist warm atmosphere of New Orleans did marvels for him. To begin with, he prospered — which he had not done in San Francisco. Six or seven weeks sped by; and each new week among them saw him at once cockier and steadier, more solid and more flash. The subtlety of the old lounging dare-devil city added its culminating touch to its equipment. He must still have been under twenty-one. Yet his faint shapely beard and mustache had come out, coal-black and virile. Everything about him bespoke the full man.

And, again, he prospered! That was the point. Not merely at the card-table, either; though, of course, card-sharping was primarily his trick. But he disdained no sort of indoor game whatever; and even frequented the race-track. Distinct natural skill he must have had — it could never be plain industry alone with so youthful a citizen. (The element of sheer luck, out-and-out, I don't somehow seem to be taking much into account. Perhaps I should — I am without personal bias, theories, in this matter.)

He drank very little; absinthe; just enough to avoid comment. Where he really cut loose was in the departments of jewelry and linen and clothes. Among other things, observe, he bought himself the true southern sporting man's diamond; a stud.

Which duly brings us back to that from which we set out — to the gambler's immemorial touchstone and crux — to Woman! . . .

Wonderful lazy old story city, looped up in the tawny scimeter of its river, half-receding away into the mystery of swamp and gray-mossed live-oaks! I shall love it always for my darling's sake. Twenty, and that

lonely pinnacle of despair! . . . But at least there were roses and palms about her now.

For here in the French quarter of New Orleans it was (need I say?) that the inevitable unhurriedly befell; that the faithful second act of the drama was played through. Pretty Sabine drama! Come at last to the unfolding of the pretty second act!

Ay, for here it was, on a morning, that the launched and fastidious master eyed his pale captive with open mind; and found her no longer a pleasing apparition. There should be trigger metal in the sensuous windings of this labyrinth of the teeming south; gayer, fitter to the sportsman's cause. Indeed, Doerck had already glimpsed a piece of exactly such metal.

Her name, in particular, was Catalina Cruz. She passed as a Spanish dancer; and unmistakably she did have Spanish blood in her, though it was probably in actuality Mexican blood, and therefore thoroughly well crossed and diluted. However, she could fairly boast the kind of attractiveness that won many and ardent friends. A brilliant dashing girl, at once luscious and sinuous, Catalina danced in variety halls, cafés and other odd places; not so much for a living as to amuse herself. Lafe Duke chanced upon her in one of these spiced entertainments; and stopped short.

With women, indeed, he rarely overlooked a vivid or unusual specimen. Not, by any means, that he entered into the lists for each personable young demirep his big eyes encountered. Far from it! There were sirens and sirens. Merely, he examined the whole procession; and now, in this present roused mood of home dissatisfaction, he was unreservedly on the market to be struck.

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Catalina Cruz struck him, deep. His cruel squint narrowed. There was one, he told himself, worth his while. With characteristic abandon, he went straight to the point with her. Catalina liked that. But it seemed she already had a protector.

Doerck shrugged; and without more ado set himself to tearing down the barriers about her. A thing of that sort could always be managed. Catalina clapped her lithe brown hands in glee. She and this stalwart young gambler understood each other from the go-off, instinctively. Her response to his overture was instant. Rocco Bordaglione, they agreed, must obviously be persuaded to give room.

Still, Rocco was a figure of some weight in their circle. He must be considered. Within ten days or two weeks or so, I was talking with this same Bordaglione gentleman myself; and a fine piquant scoundrel did I make him out to be! He kept an Italian restaurant and vermouth-drinking establishment; an unclean dive, in a narrow crooked off-street. Or, rather, the tiny restaurant and café served as cover for his real profession, which was fancying and dealing in loose quadroom, and what not, women. You could on compulsion get a meal at the Hotel Riviera, to be sure. But the company would hardly have been nice.

Bordaglione himself was a bulky smiling man, intensely good-humored, of under forty; a Piedmontese, with very white teeth, huge curling oiled mustaches and fat hands. He had a kind of expressiveness which made you squirm. Many a queer transaction must have gone on behind the non-committal façade of that old single-story gray stucco house of his. There was one province of life, though, or of "sport," in which the

fellow ranked as a pure and disinterested enthusiast. He loved cock-fighting. He loved it, you could see, with all the exuberant power of his corrupt and greasy vitality. It was his loftiest conception; his art, his religion, his spiritual meat and drink. He had a cock-pit built into his very *patio*, with a luxurious coop of gauntly splendid and preening birds at the back.

With this ingenious Piedmont fancier of fowls and women, Lafe Duke forthwith came to grips, bearding him in his dusky stronghold up the alley, and succinctly stating the case. Catalina Cruz was about to forsake her quarters at the Hotel Riviera and take up her (at any rate) temporary residence with him — Duke. Had the fancier of fowls and women something to say to that?

At first Rocco's pursy face sweated, turned purple with rage. Then his invincible good-humor surged back and overcame him. After all, it was only a girl.

"So, so!" he agreed, laughing. "Well, I bow the head. As she pleases — the Catalina. But — you and I? We must talk more of it, you and I. No?"

"Talk?" enquired Duke. "About what, for instance? A duel?"

Rocco thoughtfully scratched his fat sides.

"A duel suits *me* plenty proper," young Lafe Duke went on. "Winchester, say, at twenty steps. Tomorrow morning. Out along the edge of the lake, somewhere."

"No," grinned the portly one. "No. It was not fighting I wished to mention. Not us — ha, ha! — not between us, you comprehend. But the game-cocks, perhaps — yes? How does that make itself to you, my friend?"

Duke frowned. "You mean fight rotten chickens for the kid?"

"Ah! Chickens. Exactly."

"The devil! Me? I don't own no chickens."

"But — it is easy," engagingly suggested Rocco. "The parish swarms with them. This quarter, above all, is full of beautiful birds. Superb! Go out anywhere and get yourself some. Or no — get only one, even. It shall not be a main. We will hang everything on the one glorious battle." His eyes glistened. "That will be a moment to live for, by Mary! Eh, is it so?"

The squinting young pirate, who did not approve of giving unnecessary odds, knew that Bordaglione possessed the crack pen of fighting chickens in the whole length and breadth of New Orleans. Yet the good-natured offer seemed too eminently reasonable to be refused, especially by anybody who called himself a gambler. Reluctantly the boy nodded.

"Bravo!" chuckled Rocco. "We shall have one devilish grand go of it — that." Again he scratched at his gross padded ribs. "And now — the stakes. For me, I put up my wonderful Catalina. It is much. But you? —"

"What do you want?" Duke asked. "Money?"

"Ah. Not money." The Italian lightly lifted a creased hand to his shirt-front. "So — that trifle of white stone you carry, perhaps? —"

There was nothing for it, of course, but to chuck in the diamond stud, new and inordinately-prized as it was. Again Duke nodded. Witnesses were called; a hurried bond had to be devised and signed. The news spread like a river flood. In three days the great chivalric

love-bout should take place. Meanwhile, a stakeholder was appointed to receive the diamond; and Catalina had her formal notification to occupy, for the time, a neutral ground. No treaty of diplomats and ministers could have been more regular, shipshape. If Duke inwardly dissented, he made not a cluck of the tongue that could be heard.

As for Catalina Cruz — this pliant young person flung herself into the sentimental hazard of the game-chicken contest with all the verve of her bizarre and impetuous soul. Duke had permission to confer with her in the details of the transaction (he had expressly stipulated for that), and she it was who set him on the right track.

“See!” she exclaimed — Catalina. “Only one man in this parish has a cock that can perhaps kill Rocco’s Comandante. Perhaps. But yes, you shall go to him. He is old — Herrera. He owns a lugger, though he no longer fishes for the oyster himself. No, his sons sail the boat. He is very old, I swear to you; fights his cocks little; is little known. Yet I — I have had report of that proud strain of blood. Herrera cares not for fame. He breeds the chickens for his pleasure alone. Gray they are, and Irish — those brave cocks. His house is far down toward Chalmette. You shall go to him at once. Enrique Herrera is the name — Herrera the luggerman. You shall find him — so — as I direct.”

Duke did find the weazened old luggerman fast enough; and briefly confided his romantic tale. White-haired Enrique listened, rubbed circularly at his caved-in stomach, and softly laughed. A bird to fight for a lady’s favor? Ah, but it was magnificent! The young

señor did him too much honor. He was enchanted. And had he such a bird? Why, undoubtedly. Veritably he had the precise bird worthy to fight in such a cause. Come! The young señor should see the Grays for himself. As it happened, he was just at this minute — Herrera — in the crisis of training the rarest! . . . In fine, you should behold with your own eyes.

But the young señor, it seemed, had to plead guilty to a lamentable ignorance: he was not up in the ancient sport of princes. His almost uniquely evil life had been spent among more robust pastimes than the fighting of cocks. The simple Enrique was annoyed. Nevertheless — there — what did it count? (He told me all this, with appropriate gesture, himself.) The shriveled little luggerman would have stood out to trim and handle his own entry in the great match, anyway. Madre de Dios, he would certainly never be too old for that!

So Lafe Duke, the hardy lover, entrusted practically his whole side of the affair into the hands of that sage Chalmette mentor, as Catalina advised. At the crest of the wave now, he went curtly about his usual gambler's devices; sans diamond, it might be, but not these days ever altogether lacking in chill blackleg craft and assurance.

Well, by this it had got to be February, just before Mardi Gras. Ideal for cock-fighting, that was. And duly the afternoon of the famous tender issue raced round.

For those three days past, the section east of Canal Street had hummed with anticipation. Instead of

Rocco's alley *patio*, the biggest cockpit in the quarter must be requisitioned, to accommodate the throng.

Eagerly the throng came. Catalina Cruz (who adored the cock-fighting for its own lusty and violent sake, as a primary matter of course) — Catalina was enthroned in a tall flag-draped auction chair; a coign befitting to the queen and prize of the tourney. The naïve stakeholder slid vivaciously about among the spectators, here and there; chattering; unostentatiously exposing glints of the eminent diamond stud.

By all the laws of expectation and reaction, to be sure, the battle, when it arrived, should have been an acute disappointment; a one-blow collision, or a victory by default. Yet it was nothing of the sort. On the contrary, it made a memory that the most captious might cherish. It founded a local tradition. It did everything, in short, that a super-struggle between super-heroes ought to do.

Punctual to the letter of the contract, fat Rocco and leathery Enrique bore their two captain-birds into the arena at about the same moment.

"Comandante! Caro Chico! Comandante! Caro Chico!"

The crowd roared and squealed its impassioned partisanship. Quick the heated gibes and bets began to fly.

Unmoved, Rocco, Enrique and their aids most carefully proceeded to lash on the gaffs. Comandante, spying his rival and undaunted by the noisy ring of jostling people, vented a fierce and clarion challenge. He was a noble old bird, a war-scarred red-and-black veteran — this Comandante; idol of a dozen slashing

engagements. No chicken had yet been produced that could meet him, breast to breast. He had alert wicked red eyes; a predatory beak; plumage that was as dense and close as armor; and a courage so obvious that a mastiff might, with little wrench of scandal, have been excused for giving him the road.

Enrique's entrant (Duke's) was, on the other extreme, totally unknown; a mere youngster, just above a yearling; unscarred; a lusterless gray in color. Herrera affectionately called him Caro Chico, but he had as yet done nothing to earn or warrant a name.

Inevitably, therefore, this white-stone afternoon, Comandante ranked an overtopping favorite. He was still in his prime; a gallant picture, lordly, richly marked; his hard black breast a-gleam. Odds of two to one were freely offered and laid on him. Not that old Enrique and the Irish Grays didn't also have their notable following, however. As an expert in handling, the withered brown luggerman could scarcely be approached. He had the trick frankly on Rocco there.

So much for the preliminaries. (I ought to say for myself, perhaps, that I talked with a dozen people who witnessed the bout.) In another minute now, the birds, ready, stood out clear. Both were stripped down to the last scientifically needed feather. Both looked to be made of well-wound steel springs, operated by straining wires and whipcords. Grotesquely gaunt and strutting, Comandante incessantly stretching his throat in the shrill insulting boasts, each seemed in his separate fashion the very apotheosis of the warrior. Bound to their elastic heels, the long deadly gaffs twinkled in the sun.

Then the word fell, sharp; Rocco and Enrique

stepped back; and the two lean game champions faced each other for the actual fray. Both were erect, high-stationed birds; and, as they sparred for the opening, an involuntary murmur of satisfaction ran round the pit. Comandante was the aggressor, very confident. Under the unaccustomed pressure, gray Chico betrayed just a perceptible hint of uneasiness, uncertainty.

Of a sudden Comandante rose and shot forward through the air like a projectile from a sling. He was known as a terrific hitter; a "cutter." And this present blow justified his best previous reputation. Besides the force, it was a miracle of instinctive judgment, timing. But, by an equal miracle of agility, the young gray cock evaded it, leaping clean away, coming off without a scratch. Comandante seemed the least bit surprised and upset by the completeness of his miss. And now Chico, on his side, maneuvered with a shade more security.

"Comandante! Caro Chico!" yelled the crowd.

But the wary young gray did not really attempt to trade thrusts with his ferocious red-and-black pursuer. Not for a measurable while longer. He played a supple waiting game; evidently feeling out his ground; learning from the other's experience each new shift. At length, when he did begin viciously to strike, it wasn't for Comandante's gleaming solid-feathered breast that he aimed. He raked like a whistling sword for the head.

However, it was only the perfection of his extraordinary defensive ability that carried him through to this point. For Comandante kept driving the steely razors at him with steadfast venomous fury, again and again and again. Chico ducked when he must, and

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whipped back for the high bristling head when he could. The crowd quivered and cheered. Old Herrera, squatting, rubbed circularly at his depressed stomach with one thin brown hand, mumbling intricate Spanish endearments. Santa Maria! Could he still breed a chicken, or could he not?

Unmistakably, indeed, Comandante was tiring. And — dazed shaken idol! — tiring fast. The phenomenal young gray cock had succeeded in wearing him down. Reënforce his desperate blows with wing-butts as he might, the kicks were waning in both speed and power. In the end, after an especially high savage chop by relentless Chico, a tiny trickle of blood showed on the old warrior's burnished black front. None called his name now. One more neatly placed gash, always in the neck, and he was out, the head half-severed, for good.

Enrique plunged forward, picked the blood-spotted gray nemesis up in trembling hands, and held him aloft.

“Caro Chico! Viva! Caro Chico!”

All the pit seethed and rocked and clamored. Catalina Cruz bounded forward from her tall seat; and, in turn, tempestuously kissed the bobbing young Irish champion, old Herrera and her new lover; staying to loll insolently (every pulse the triumphant courtesan!) in that strapping new lover's husky arms.

What they would have done if they had lost — how behaved — I'm sure I don't know.

CHAPTER NINETEENTH

THE MOTHER

And so, inexorably, I am at last brought back to my patient darling, sitting alone there in her shadowed lodging-house room within a stone's throw of the French Market. Perhaps, through all this digression, this involved and garish hearsay, I have consciously been avoiding the return to her. But now it can no longer be staved off.

The first result of Doerck's defection from her side was to fill her with a mute lax peace, an indescribable peace. Other than to protect himself, he would not care any more what she did — what became of her. It was the hour she had breathlessly been waiting for, since the cave, unhallowed day and week and month. . . . That prodigy of devoted woman's waiting! . . . And now — just to be able to lift up her face — to feel a soul stir within her again — her old lost soul! . . .

Naturally, all those choice details of Doerck's match for Catalina would not be spared her. Rather, were they relayed to her with the utmost of vivid excitability and caress. He — Doerck — did not wish it so. But who was he to fend for her against a pack of women, purring and sluttish, cruelly hovering? Ay, the discarded one must miss no single whisper of the thrill. And, notwithstanding her ecstasy of release, how the cats could play with her, in her state! . . . Well, she must still bide the time.

And then — that perverse ordeal also was over. Doerck, as usual with him these days, had won his toss. Now, truly, showed the term to her endurance in plain view!

A hobbling parchment crone of a French negress, called merely La Femme (or sometimes Marie La Femme), tended her in the dim room off the courtyard where Doerck had installed her. La Femme remained in the gambler's pay. It made what amounted to a rather curious twist of affairs.

For, in his typical process of deserting the stolen girl, Doerck betrayed an unexpected and untypical hint of weakness, of ambiguity. He did not exactly hang fire. Yet, as an obvious matter of fact, he was in two minds. The animal spell of his captive's beauty was gone. That, positively! And he, of course — what silly waste of words! — made less than no bones at all about allying himself with another woman. But in the prolonged stretch of their former incredible life together, he had been forced — by sheer weight of testimony, literally *forced* — to catch some remote sign of his companion's selfless and exalted strength. He was casting her off now, right enough. When her trouble had blown over, though — who could tell? He might conceivably want to come back to her again.

At any rate, in heaven knows what confused and distorted way, the young blackguard actually seemed to desire to keep his prey on as "friend"; as a stable point in the unsound lying universe he realized himself to inhabit; as a kind of patron saint; an unexampled symbol of the Eternal Woman. He had plenty of money these sleek days. Perhaps Eloise was his luck, his star. No, decidedly, he did not relish the notion of

seeing her slip altogether through his malign fingers. He might live to regret it — that.


So, for once, he simply drifted; came to a sordid agreement with yellow old La Femme, and simply allowed things to drift. He did not believe Eloise had the thought of a plan for reprisals. Her father was dead. She would never go back to me — he had at last genuinely got hold of the psychology of that truth — for any bribe in the known or hidden worlds. Vengeance, therefore, could bring her nothing — nothing but the most unwelcome notoriety. She had her culminating female initiation directly before her. As far as he could discover, she asked, she begged, just to be let alone.

It was a chance. Her story would certainly make fine pickings for the police. But no, he did not believe she would go to the police.

Anyway, he paid old La Femme well to guard and watch her. And he could always disappear at an hour's notice — bah, at ten minutes'! There were a hundred easy snapshot routes of ducking down into Mexico. Or he could catch a coffee boat for Rio. Or, at worst, he could take a mere header into the surrounding network of swamps and bayous. Yes, that could always be managed.

Doerck it was, then, who moved away from their original modest lodging in the French Market neighborhood. He offered no explanation; but just coolly sent most of his traps off to the gayer and grander Royal Street establishment where he would live with his chicken-won Catalina. . . . The blessed, blessed day that must have been to my poor hostage girl!

The new order fell like a strange creation out of the



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Bible. No sooner had the heavenly deliverance of it settled about her than she gave herself up entirely to the fulfillment of her now one hope. To have been denied even that! . . . For a white unbroken cycle of hours, she lay still on her bed; tasting the freedom; making ready, at her antique rusted span of twenty years, to close her account with the existence she had somehow — was it her willfulness? — never been able to comprehend.

*“Ma chandelle est morte,
Je n’ ai plus de feu.”*

Why did that pretty, foolish child-song keep running incessantly through her head, over and over and over again? Low-voiced, lying dreamy, almost content, on her large four-posted bed, she chanted it, as the serious and gracious children might have done, at their game.

*“Ouvre-moi ta porte,
Pour l’amour de Dieu!”*

Should she also write a line, as this enigmatic young person in the song had pretended to want to do? Should she leave a letter? Dare she grant herself that final happiness? . . .

No, much better not. We, of the other world who loved her — we must already have begun to think of her as dead. Already, little by little, we must have begun to learn to forget. It would be wanton, heartless, to recall herself to us, for just this last sweet fleeting moment. Write? Dizzily she shut her eyes, tightened against the indulgence. Instead of writing, let her rather destroy in herself every possible vestige of that other-world identity!

Old La Femme evidently fancied she was going to remain singing on the bed, there, indefinitely. A highly important cognac bottle in the ménage happened to be empty; and, seizing a sly dusk-of-evening crevice, the yellow hag hobbled away to replenish it. My darling heard, understood. This was her cue. Quickly she got up and dressed.

No farewell to life could have been more bald. It was for this hour that she had tried to save her wedding-ring. But vainly — even so much destiny had denied her. Well, perhaps the ring would after all have told the tale — her tale of infamy that must now forever go untold. Still, it would have been such joy to bear it on her — the dear ring. Just till maybe one second before the end, if she might not really take it with her.

And now, she had nothing, absolutely. Every thread of clothes she had worn that prehistoric September afternoon, in her pilgrimage of tenderness to our bridal-place by the pool — every tiniest material object — Tragedy, the bleak godmother — Tragedy had robbed her of them all. Destroy the traces of her other-world identity! What trace was there left to destroy?

Wanly she smiled into her mirror. A lonely ill-shaped girl, without a wedding-ring, treading the road so many another had trod before! And yet — for a summer once — had not that been of the essence of human realization? Could one go farther? Must not one pay for having gone so far? She paused — the well-beloved of the dead past summer — and said good-by to herself in the candle-lighted glass.

Though February, it was a nearly tepid evening; a damp, dim-starred early evening, like spring. Turning south-westward from her house-grating, she walked

leisurely through the moist dark; across Jackson Square and out Decatur Street to the brighter thoroughfare of Canal Street; and thence on down to the levee. All the while, as she walked, she was singing under her breath —

“Ma chandelle est morte.”

Arrived at the levee, she looked about for the funny old shell of a ferryboat that plied between New Orleans and Algiers, far across on the other side. Mistily, through the humid river spaces, one uncommunicative distant light could be seen over there. She had to wait for the boat. When it came in, she slipped shyly aboard.

The great sullen winter river, muddy and somber and implacable, swished by on its monotonous course to the Gulf. Eloise had a sudden lucid picture, as startling and irrelevant as a dream, of the intrepid Spanish gold-hunter of more than three centuries before — he who had had his body committed to the care of these same dully rushing waters. Three centuries! Had he indeed found ease in the primeval mud?

As the wheezing ferryboat drew out into the stream, she took up her expectant position at the stern.

*“Ouvre-moi ta porte,
Pour l'amour de Dieu!”*

Brooding and softly humming, she still bided the reluctant time.

And then, eventually, near to midstream, her chance came; the opening of the narrow door she had so humbly supplicated for. Leaping from a coil of rope to a bale, to a pile of boxes, and so on up to the solid rail of the boat, she poised for an instant, then flung herself

heavily into the swirling brown current. "Ma chandelle est morte," her lips were yet mechanically saying when everything closed in over her.

Too late, half a dozen indolent people on the deck saw her jump and plunge, shrieked wildly to stop the boat. They ran to the stern, halloed to her, shuffled and peered. But the flooded river was rapidly sweeping her away from their eyes out into the thick fog of dark. None attempted to swim after her.

The decrepit ferryboat, asthmatic and unwieldy, could never have been pushed to the rescue. Its upstairs pilot, grasping nothing, did not even try. Only, Destiny, it seems, must be consulted in these matters.

Coming from the Algiers side of the river, and shooting out from behind the ferry in the precise nick, a bateau rowed by a pair of burly negroes swung across my poor girl's drifting path. Straight into the outstretched paws of those two grinning waterside scavengers she drove; thrashing; helpless; almost before her spreading clothes could be saturated enough to begin to drag her down.

"Ouvre-moi ta porte!"

Despite all her frantic efforts to avoid them, the two men pulled her in; and landed her again on the now bell-ringing ferryboat, indecisive and feebly pounding. De Soto's primeval mud, then, was not to be her door. The flurried boat crew brought her back to the New Orleans side; and put her in a carriage; she, white and convulsed, scarcely conscious of what they did with her, or of anything.

Later that same night, in the Hôtel Dieu of the kindly southern river city which knew tragedy well, her

dishonored seven-months' child was born; *my* dishonored child; dead. Still-born — a son — “to Mr. and Mrs. Matt Hainlen” — trailing clouds of . . . My God!

And the dishonored young wife and mother? . . .

I am not of the ecclesiastic pattern. I lay claim to no church. But if ever before my death I should, like so many men, feel the need of this staff to lean on, it will assuredly be to the church of Sister Delphine Monteux (and with her memory definitely in mind) that I shall turn.

Sister Delphine — the pleasure of saying her pretty Creole name! She was the nurse who had Eloise chiefly in charge that February night, just before Carnival, in the year 1885. A prayer is not much. Nor yet a little handful of money, now and then, to a grave Mother Superior. These at least, though, we have not failed to proffer, each Lent since, to the praise of our simple savior, of her dark-garbed order and her house of solace from pain.

How this rosy smiling creature had come to be a nun is past me. Plump, blonde, gay-spirited and bustling, less than thirty years old — so she was, our Sister Delphine. Manifestly love and the maternal instinct were quite exceptional gifts with her. If ever woman in the world had been expressly dowered with such, straight from on high, that woman must have been our same Sister Delphine. And they must have shown out in her — those good housewife gifts — even as a child. No stern conventual habit, let it be as somber and ugly as you please, could hide them. No barren forbidding round of discipline could damp her. No shadow of sin

or suffering could touch the fount of her healthy, energetic human sunniness.

And yet — a nun ; childless ; impersonally efficient ; a charity nurse in the wards of the New Orleans Hôtel Dieu ! By aid of her hungry intuitions and sympathy, she fairly warmed my darling back to life.

For it was more than nursing. She gave herself to the task, not as if it were a duty, but as if the poor lost girl brought into her maternity ward wet from the river had been an angel fallen direct out of the skies. Of course she recognized the delicacy, the distinction, the weary and haggard mystery of those long blue-black eyes. So might many another gentle religious soul — and still have asked questions.

Sister Delphine asked no questions. Had there been guilt, shame ? She couldn't believe so. But that, at any rate, was not for her. She nursed ; she wooed ; she stroked and comforted ; she babbled lovely whispering half-French and half-English fondnesses, mother calls ; and held the shivering pallid hands. She spent herself, in short, as only a strong and courageous woman can, without judgment or qualification, without hope of anything for herself, without rest.

Then a terrible fever set in ; a puerperal fever, so violent and persistent and acute that, for three days, the weight of a feather might easily have swung the balance, this side or that. Only Sister Delphine never despaired. It is the part of doctors, she told me, to shake their heads ; not the nurse's. She — she would just smoothe the coarse ward sheet, and press the tips of her plump fingers together, and smile.

In those seventy-two hours of delirium, many names came out ; but only one coherently connected with a geo-

graphical place which could be fastened upon and got at. That was the name of Miss Sylvia Lakeland, and the place Berwick, Maine. So Sister Delphine made her suggestive report to headquarters, and a telegram was sent.

The next day after that, in Piegan Springs, I also received this same prodigious telegraph message, verbatim, wired on to me by Eloise's grand-aunt. Then five more unmentionable days and nights, and I was myself in New Orleans.

CHAPTER TWENTIETH

I SAY SOME MORE WORDS, KNEELING

Miss Lakeland, of course, had got there before me. Eloise was already installed in a private room, with her own nurse. But Sister Delphine would still slip in from the ward to hover delightedly over her, for two minutes at a stretch, half a dozen times a day. Out of all the multitude of her services, she could somehow contrive that.

Also it was, of course, Miss Lakeland that I saw first. I had by now grown so accustomed to nightmare as to conceive of it as a quite natural medium. *Could* I wake? And Eloise's exquisite little tender-colored cameo of a grand-aunt? To discuss the particulars of such impossible shame with her — such an impossible phantasmagoria of soilure, theft, debauchery! With Miss Sylvia Lakeland of Berwick! How monstrous, how grotesque! . . .

Certainly that faded charming little Berwick maiden lady and I would most willingly have spared each other this interview. Yet neither of us really faltered at the point, I think; she, I know, did not. We sat in a meager dark cubbyhole on the ground floor of the hospital, under a stair; a semi-conventual cell, in itself as depressing as a tomb. Miss Lakeland led me there, knowing it as a place where we could be perfectly unmolested and alone; and there, with madness prickling

at my skin, head and hands, I heard her low constrained voice flow on and on.

So I gleaned at last the terrible facts; the terrible dragon's-teeth harvest of leperous facts; just as she had in her fashion sensitively been able to glean them, bit by bit, from the listless girl on the slow convalescent's bed upstairs; just as I have here been trying, with my clumsy outsider's unuse, finally to set them down. Mine, I believe, is truly not Miss Lakeland's tale. Yet it was all sufficiently indicated in hers — all my to-day's painful summing-up elaboration. She evaded nothing that could be essential for me to know.

And did ever monologue to match that fall before from the lips of so virginal, dainty and bird-like an elderly New England spinster? I can scarce credit it.

But — I do not attempt to go beyond my personal sense of the moment. As the muted words of horror rustled on in the heavy air about me, a million stabbing lights and shadows played back and forth across the surface of my brain. Withal, a part of me even held aloof and watched. I remember thinking Miss Lakeland very wonderful. It was my girl's own blood.

She did her best — poor Miss Lakeland — to persuade me not to ask to see Eloise at once. Manifestly, though, this would be out of the question. To her patient downcast urgency I paid less than no heed at all. Brutal and utterly without vision (hardly responsible, indeed), I trampled roughshod over her delicate and wise reserves. It was the late afternoon of the second day of Lent. Presently, with leaden steps that wavered, the little splendid great-aunt yielded and went upstairs to prepare a way for me.

When Eloise's nurse came down with my summons,

and I entered alone the small private room off the upper corridor, the figure lying with averted face on the spidery iron hospital bed quickly lifted both hands toward me, not in a gesture of welcome, but warningly, the palms flattened and outward.

"Don't come any nearer!" said my darling's voice. And there was that in it — I could not disobey.

"But —" I protested brokenly.

"You must not come any nearer," she repeated; and the admonishing palm-outward hands dropped weakly on the sheets beside her, and her averted face retreated still deeper away from me into the pillows.

Miss Lakeland stood bowed by in a corner. Apologetically she breathed — "Eloise — pardon — she wouldn't permit me to go."

"But —" I blubbered. What greeting, in heaven's name, had I thought to receive? In Christ's name, and the angels' — *what?* . . .

The marbly white figure on the bed, with her lustrous obsidian-black hair massed up against the loose pillows behind her, seemed not to have life. "Am I never, then, to come near you again?" I cried wildly.

Her voice, muffled, barely reached to me. "I don't know anything yet. I haven't tried yet — to think. But — if I am not to die —"

"No, no!" sobbed Miss Lakeland.

"Can I be the wife — of two men? —"

Wife of two men? Of Rafe Doerck and me — right — the wife of two men! . . .

Yes, so it was, absolutely. Rafe Doerck — he and I — we two — on equal terms. And no, *not* equal! The thief, the destroyer — he with his cave and his threats and his force — he with his later claim! . . .

A thing like a crackling bolt of lightning, fair out of the immutable high-arched sky — a thing struck me; struck, but did not blast. No, it did not blast. Rather, it vitalized me with an extraordinary new energy, masterful and benign; warmed and laved and healed me with its cleansing electric fires. Two men? Ravager Rafe Doerck and I! Free-going young Rafe Doerck and I! . . .

Softly I called to my darling — “Don’t try to think. Not yet. It’s not the time — not yet. Rest. Just lie back and rest. And now I understand. Wait. I sha’n’t come even this near you again. That is your wish?”

She twisted her face round from the pillows and gave me those long haunting madonna eyes full.

“Yes.”

“Time, time! It will be easier soon. Don’t think. Just wait.”

I turned, found the door and rushed out. On the street floor, in the dark visitors’ cubbyhole under the stair, Miss Lakeland caught up with me.

“Help us!” she implored. “You must help us — to save her. In spite of herself, she must be saved. Look — I am selfish. But I have nobody else. If only for me, she must be saved. Let me beg you — I know how you do love her — let me beg you to make some sacrifice!”

Poor anguished little lady! I was so aflame with my startled new pang of decision — I could have swept her up in my arms, kissed her worn dry cheeks and fled. But — steady!

“What sacrifice?” I demanded. “There is something — in especial? —”

"Yes. Something fearfully important. Eloise insists on it — continually."

"Tell me."

"The danger to your life. No, don't frown! Eloise feels that all she has — has undergone — will have been in vain, if your life is endangered now. She dwells on this, day and night. She blames me for having brought you."

Sacrifice! These women!

"Which means, then?" I went on to query, with the utmost gentleness of which I was at the instant, in my passion of engrossment, capable.

"That you will leave here at once, won't you? That you will not want to stay on here, in this place, to have her still further tormented?"

In the mazes of some lunatic sort of welter — ay, my mind was working now; fast; toward a thoroughly definite end.

"I sha'n't try to see her any more," I agreed. "Not for a while. You may assure her of that."

"And you'll leave this city — at once — to-night?"

"I sha'n't try to see her any more for a while," I cited doggedly. "That's the extent of my submission." The little frail maiden lady drooped in despair before me. "Why need she know where I am?"

"Ah, ah! You don't guess. You *say* you understand! But what do you understand? Can you think that I dare quibble with her? Know? She will *require* to know!"

Bitterness! From the mild ashen lips of Miss Lakeland!

I picked myself up. Veritably could I not expect this wonderful old Congregationalist dear, with her

shrinking and her New England refinements, to do my gross lying for me.

"Very well," I nodded. "I shall leave town. At once."

She wept. Then, hurriedly (for I was in a fever to be gone), we spoke of money; and of plans for moving Eloise; and of other necessary arrangements. Above all, we spoke of the police.

I should not omit to mention here (and might appreciate!) how good the hospital authorities had been about keeping our grievous wounds from publicity. Urbane and discreet, with their instinctive churchly cloak for the erring, these humane nuns and priests had protected Eloise from the first, as a simple matter of course. The fact that a girl had been fished up out of the river and taken to the maternity ward of the Hôtel Dieu would naturally be reported; and the next day after the event (a commonplace enough), half a dozen lines were carried in all the local papers. But no name was known then. And nothing concerning the history of the case had since been given, either to the small weaselly fragment of the French quarter public which had enquired, or to the press. Nor, at any stage, were the police invited to enter into the proceedings.


Be sure that now Miss Lakeland and I strained every nerve to bolster such aloofness from notoriety and the police. We tried to build up a bulwark, shock-proof, completely about the sick girl. Just as soon as it could possibly be managed, her grand-aunt would smuggle her abroad; probably from this very port. For me, I was to keep out of harm's way — by aid of the precautions which we discussed. It is not in the least needful, at thirty years' distance, to rehearse those precautions.

I had positively no idea of living up to the tenor of them. Nevertheless, the primary consideration was — must be — to quiet Eloise.

So, then, without more recourse to the minutiae of the strange-angled parley under the stair with little Miss Sylvia Lakeland, I shall from this on merely make what shift I can to relate my movements; to relate them, that is, in such loose semblance of logic and order as they of themselves fell into. Which, I'm afraid, will not be much. Still, when at length I had left the hospital at the close of the chaotic February afternoon, it was with a method, a campaign, pretty well mapped out in my whirling head.

To begin with, I had as a boy of sixteen browsed about in New Orleans once before. My father chanced to be putting in some rather beautiful and important church glass down here then, in the spring of '73; and, as so often and so happily occurred with us, he had whisked me along south with him. For several weeks, therefore, on that vacation, I had enjoyed an almost entire artistic liberty in the old Queen City of the Mississippi; and had availed myself of it; and wandered back and forth across the storied banquettes with a young inquisitive vengeance; and more or less learned the hang of a number of the queer streets, alluring and un-American as they were. I too was of a French stock, remember.

Now those blurred boyish memories of twelve years ago stood me in excellent stead. First of all, I went straight to the St. Charles Street hotel where father and I had formerly lived. Not so many things were changed roundabout, though perhaps I failed just then to examine my landmarks with the eye of a really wide-



awake northern tourist. My main present business, however, far from the historico-geographic, was intensely personal — sanitative, almost; namely, the speedy acquirement of a room and bath. When I had got access to these, I stripped, and quickly and earnestly set about preparing myself for a ritual; a somber and religious sacrament.

In a weird twisted kind of fashion, this — no, it was not, in fundamentals, widely unlike that other unforgettable ordeal of preparation; the ascetic July night, I mean, before our marriage at the pool. Only, to-night I should have to keep the tryst, say my binding words, alone — quite stark alone!

Well, the hour and event befitted that. All haste I made, there, in my pleasant warm-toned hotel diggings. When I was approximately satisfied with myself, I sallied out into the streets again, and crossed over into the French side. Briefly I had brought sharp up at the door of the cathedral of St. Louis.

Within, the old rebuilt Spanish church was dark and piercingly damp. From the street I advanced boldly over the cold flags to a position before the central altar, and knelt. Though my body might be clean, my spirit, I frankly admitted, measured no way near to what I would fain have had it be. All the same, I saw not a hope of anything immediately better. The conditions made me. I could never rise above them. And time, as always, was precious.

On trembling knees before the dim-candled altar, hands clasped, eyes tightly shut, I offered up my primitive Judaic prayer; vow; declaration; threat, even — call it what you will. These were the words:

“O God! Hear me and judge. To-day this man

and I tread the same ground, taste the same air, are warmed by the same sun. That may not be. Therefore, let one or other or both of us surely die. If it be so written in Thy great Book, I beseech Thine aid and mercy for myself. But if it be not just to press so far, then only let the end come soon. Amen."

Up I sprang. Truly, it was not a very magnificent proposal — that — to place before the throne of heaven. Yet, as truly, it was the utmost I could at this moment achieve; and, having achieved so much, I strode out from the church feeling the lighter and clearer and freer for it.

I do not accurately understand the technique and psychology of prayer. I don't pretend to. None, conceivably, will take it from my muttered invocation in the old New Orleans cathedral of St. Louis that I at all dreamed of trusting my side of the death grapple with Rafe Doerck wholly into the sublime care of God. On the exact contrary! I meant to leave no practical earthly stone unturned, to profit myself of every remotest hint of moral and legal advantage. Maybe you will guess how little I might need a special impetus in this direction. Nevertheless — observe!

With my solider, shriven (as it were) step, I emerged brusquely from the dark doorway of the church out upon the night square. I had the next move in my procedure perfectly planned ahead.

"Is it that monsieur perhaps desires some gayety after his prayers?"

I wheeled, and found myself peering under a low-drawn scarf into a small and archly smiling face. Like me, I say "archly smiling"; when I could in reality make nothing of it — that face — beyond the provoca-

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tive liquid gleam of eye and teeth. The voice was professional and demure, and the tongue French; though French with a stiff and barbarous twang; not native French.

"Gayety!" I exclaimed, involuntarily ironic.

"But yes. There is a salle for dancing only around the corner."

"So?" I mumbled. A thought gave pause to my very blood. Locking harsh clamps on to myself, I ventured slowly, in English—"Tell me this, mademoiselle, if you please. Do you happen to know a young fellow over here, a gambler, named Duke—Lafe Duke?"

"Certainly, monsieur. I know him well."

"Ah. And can you take me to where he is?"

She shrugged assent.

"But *now*? Can you take me to where he is—right now?"

"Undoubtedly. If monsieur wishes that, rather than the dancing."

"Let the end come soon," I had prayed on my knees in at the altar. And this—so swift, so pat!

"I do wish it," I said to the accosting girl. "We're hunting for each other—this Lafe Duke and I. Lead away. You shall not just have your trouble, I promise you, for your pains."

Again she shrugged. "If monsieur will be pleased to follow, then."

"One second. Is it to a public gambling-house?"

"It is not known as such. Yet men do, in fact, gamble there. One plays if he likes. But monsieur shall see everything for himself."

"That's good enough. Thanks. At your heels."

She turned and glided away, lithe and supple, all

rounded youthful grace. For me, I marched one vigilant pace behind.

Though I had gone to heaven with my cause, I repeat, here is token of how scrupulously I was also trying to keep my powder dry. I bristled like a bandit. Even while in the act of kneeling in church, I could plainly distinguish the weight and shape of the two pieces of armament I now always carried on me. Bulkily reposing in my right hip trousers pocket was a latest model, double-acting, .41 caliber Colt's revolver; and, in a bit of a trick holster under the left arm, inside my coat, snuggled that same little .32 Smith and Wesson of the gulch; my maudlin gift, on a time, to questing Eloise; the shiny toy pilgrim's gun with which I had once taken my snap shot at Doerck — and so ignominiously missed!

At the present interesting juncture, stealthily, quite covered up, I transferred this second small weapon, the politer of the two, from its inner holster to the outside lower pocket on the right-hand of my overcoat. It rode extremely comfortable and nice there; reassuring; my fingers glued to the roughened hard-rubber butt.

Was I organizing all this elaborate system of defense, one protests, against a poor pavement adventurer of a girl? Well, I had not totally escaped the ancient string of platitudes about women and emissaries and the devil. Perhaps I flattered myself. But, in any case — “keep your powder dry,” laid down the homely sage. And I distinctly preferred to survive.

The admittedly shady young person with the glistening eyes and teeth was now leading off in the opposite direction from Canal Street, and back from the river. It had by this, too, come on to be a heavy chill night;

moonless, thick dark. We walked. A rapid devious block or so, and dash — I had no ghost of a notion where we might be!

Obviously the girl was steering a roundabout course. One could make *that* out — the looping and twisting — with ease. But not much else. I grew more and more helpless. At each street lamp I would shamelessly whip up from behind and try for a close look into my companion's face. She was swathed and muffled to a coquettish hair in all the mysterious sex paraphernalia of the Latin south, however; and deftly parried my cleverest effort. This way, the other — on we trod.

She knew Doerck. . . . Doerck, Doerck — poisonous Rafe Doerck — befouling young Rafe Doerck! . . .

When at last the lady stopped (and it was not long), we stood in a particularly dark, tree-shadowed alley, before an old wall; a high adobe wall, or a brick, stuccoed. It seemed to be the rear of the premises, I thought; a narrow and dirty and evil-smelling kennel of a place. Though the light was so scant, I could at least surmise the stout timbering of the door, the general air of stability and strength in the whole wall façade. There was no lattice or peep-hole or grating, no bell or knocker, that I could peer out. My guide silently produced a large key from among her scarfs somewhere, and thrust it into the lock. I made sure I could hear the soft padding of an animal's feet inside; a snuffing; the faint thrilling click-click of its rigid nails against the stone paving.

"Wait!" I commanded. "You live here?"

"No, monsieur."

"But this chatelaine's key — this Bastille key?"

"The house is open to me. I come and go." She

had not yet pushed the door ajar. "Will you enter?"

"And what's that I hear prowling about inside?"

"There is nothing, monsieur."

"Let the end come soon," I had prayed. But this — it was uncanny. And the restless tip-tapping skulker inside? One could not *see* anything! Was it a dog — that? Covertly I half drew the little .32 revolver from my pocket.

"Will monsieur enter, now that we are here?" mockingly repeated the girl.

"Right. After you."

She thrust with her shoulder, and the door swung on smooth hinges, disclosing — no, not disclosing, but hinting — the black well of a courtyard. A fat lot of time, though, I then had for inspection and exact classifications. The door opened inward; and, as she jammed it back, the girl slipped quick aside. Instantly a lean powerful gray fury of a beast hurled itself out at me.

It was a dog, all proper; a dog, I would have sworn, bred in the nether pits of hell. No sign of outcry did he make. There may have been the whisper of a whine deep in him, as he leapt. But I don't think so. He was too intent on getting at my throat to bother about noise.

Those jaws! Luckily, his stiff forefeet hit me on the chest before the teeth could reach and fasten on me, and I staggered back away clear of him, half off my balance. And then, distractedly, I heard the voice of the demure coquettish street girl again; in English now; English as imperfect as her French had been, yet comprehensible enough.

"Aiee, aiee, aiee! At him, Tito! Take him, Tito!

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Tear him down, *lobito*, pull him down! On, on, Tito! Take him! Tear him down! Aiee, aiee, aiee!"

Never were words in the world, I fancy, more wasted than those cheering on that soundless dog. As if such an affectionate "*lobito*" would need encouragement!

Out in the fairway of the alley he came at me this second trip, a deadly corded gray streak. I was new from Montana; and with my wholesome winter-shod foot, I caught him in mid-career. The memory of that kick delights me to this day. Tito grunted, snarled. But it was like kicking a steel spring. Back he bounded, tall and dripping-fanged, always straight for the throat. A fiend!

"Take him, Tito! On, on! Pull him down! Aiee, Tito! Aiee, aiee, aiee!"

In the first movement of shock, I had automatically jerked my hand clean out of the side overcoat pocket; my right hand, that is to say, with the little shiny Smith and Wesson in it. I didn't want to have to shoot and raise a row. But otherwise, I perceived, I had not the wisp of a chance against this blood-thirsty cur.

"Yes, and take that too, Tito!" I muttered. "That one — so!" And I gave him the little wicked-cracking gun plump in the yawn of the trap-jawed mouth.

With a groan he went down. Only, in the catch of a breath, whimpering, to be up and at me again!

Having fired once, it could not matter now. "Pang!" spoke the handy nickeled gulch pea-shooter, for go number two.

This time he had not been able to jump for my throat, but was just lurching madly along over the black ground for my legs; so that I could let him have it tolerably free and unhampered between those dully

blazing wolf's eyes. Which punctually turned the trick for Master Gray *Lobito*, you may believe, then and now and evermore; unless, indeed, bad dogs are subject to penitential reincarnations.

For me, though — I must have hesitated one fatal moment before stumbling on over him toward the door in the wall. At any rate, when I got to it — the stout wooden door — it was shut; and the girl gone; and the big key had vanished from the outside lock.

"Jezebel!" I yelled (or something worse), impotently booting, pounding, at the solid face of planks.

In answer, from above me somewhere (from the top of the wall, of course, though nobody was there when I looked), a knife came acutely whizzing down. And well for me, too, I happened to be so tight pressed in against the door! Point-on, that driving knife-blade pierced sleekly through the crown and back part of my hat, cutting into the scalp and finally lodging, still point-on, in the seam of my wide overcoat collar. Stung, I mechanically reached up and dragged the knife out; and ducked brisk away across the alley; crouching in the impenetrable shadow of the opposite wall.

After that — not another ripple of life! No policeman or watchman appeared to enquire into the shots. Nobody appeared at all. I could feel the smart and the trickle of warm blood as it flowed disagreeably out of my hair down the back of my neck. Presently I shoved revolver and knife into my pocket.

Altogether, it seemed a healthy and reasonable thing to do — just to beat a hasty "strategic" retreat, as the militarists, with their subtlety, define the operation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIRST

ON THE LEVEE

So, none too gay, I floundered muddily about the neighborhood (it was incredibly inky and deserted); wore back and forth until I had got my bearings, in a general sort of way, and had located at least the section. Then I turned to and scudded under full spread for the hotel.

The nick in my scalp burned, and the gore from it seeped down my neck fast enough to be making rather a mess of my clothes. But I bundled the winter overcoat collar high up about my ears; and, shortly, had the good luck to run into a nighthawk cab drooping at a stand before a small dubious café. Whereupon I went indoors and routed the comfortable cocher out from behind his table, and —“Home, James,” was the relieved word. Deliberately that shabby soldier of adventure rattled me across the ill-paved gloom of the Vieux Carré to my more modern quarters on St. Charles Street.


From there, in the end, after much mopping and fussing with my head, I had to send out for a doctor. The man of medicine, plump, quiet, gray, duly arrived with his accouterment of black bag; examined me and smilingly pronounced that no stitches were needful. The smile, perhaps I ought to indicate, was bred in him by my naïve account of how I had chanced to come by the

Little gash in my cranium. It must have been a natty conversation.

I don't think I exactly said I had done the thing while shaving. All the same, the device I used would be something nearly as clever as that. Doctor Blondel's tolerant smile, I remember, extremely humiliated me. Lying was now an essential part of the warp and woof of my program; and I angrily told myself I might as well begin to try to manage it with anyhow a saving touch of grace.

But the main point was that the knife-slit down the back of my skull (which had, in fact, scraped the skull a wee bit, though neither long nor dangerous) did at last consent to stop bleeding. The doctor dressed it, packed up his tools and departed; a true, easy-going model of the genial New Orleans gentleman. Curiously, too, I out of hand commenced to feel toppy, sanguine, buoyant, again. What! Had I not, in any event, got the dashing better of the lady's grizzled wolf of a dog? I rang for telegraph blanks, and for some dinner to be served to me in my room. While the dinner was coming, I composed a couple of middling difficult wires.

The first carried the address of my people in Pittsburgh. I certainly did not want any of the members of the Hainlen family down here right now. They could never help, and their presence — efficient men as I knew my father and uncles to be — would only decidedly complicate matters. Wherefore I explained only as much as I conveniently could, and let the rest slide, simply promising to write. Yet I endeavored to phrase the message in such fashion that they would be utterly unwarranted in thinking to look for me here, or in any



other given place. So! This disposed of my number one.

Then, next, I must have an absolute confidant in New York. I had told Miss Lakeland I was going straight back to my untenanted New York office, and begin to work. I had told her practically anything. But also I had given her Randolph, Gay and Whetford's for my temporary address. Which meant, naturally, that I ought to have somebody there to receive and answer telegrams (at any moderate rate) in my name. It was a sufficiently delicate business, under the circumstances. Already, though, I had settled on my man; and a bully good settlement it has since proved, from every seasoned angle. Here are the bare facts.

Birk Lanchard was the newest student at Randolph, Gay and Whetford's; or had been, rather, when I left, nearly a year ago. (Randolph, Gay and Whetford's, you may recall, was the swagger Broadway architectural shop where I had done my overlong term of apprenticeship, my nerve-cracking.) I had liked Birk, there, in our preoccupied draughting-room acquaintance, from the outset; as I didn't seem to be able to like any of the dozen other young fellows about the establishment. That is to say, it was a liking between us in special sense and degree, you understand. Birk and I had ideas in common, and sympathetic temperaments, though our tastes ran to wholly dissimilar types of work. He was strong on engineering, and would easily make, I could soon see, a capital man for big public and commercial buildings, and so on.

In my continual dreams those days of launching out into the world for myself, I had often and often thought of Birk as a possible partner. He was a shade younger


than I, to be sure; but unmistakably quite as far advanced in his own architectural direction as I in mine. He had some money coming to him from his mother, too, whenever he was ready for it. Once we had even openly discussed the partnership plan.

Since my abrupt shunt by the doctors out to Montana last spring, though, and the consequent deep emotional involvements there, I am afraid I had not given Birk or business or our great project of Art many moments of consideration. Yet I now hesitated scarcely at all. The second of my pair of pretty elaborate wires went snap off the reel to him — to Mr. Birkett Lanchard, care Randolph, Gay and Whetford, Broadway at Union Square. What ho! So much for so much!

By this time, a handsome tray of distinctively nifty New Orleans dinner was waiting at my door; and I admitted it, and fell to with an edge. When we were clear of that, and I had dugged out a cap from my bags to replace the ruined hat, and had sent off the telegraph messages (but not from the hotel), there was still one more important item hanging unchecked on the night's calendar.

Let me, however, just sketch the broad impression I had got of New Orleans, in my two visits. First and last, I had found it all extraordinarily interesting — the old town. That does not half describe my feeling. I don't mean the history, the mere variegated inlay of background. No, the immediate town itself.

I felt it to be a huge storehouse of the most fascinating current mysteries. I felt anything might happen here; ay, literally anything! The prospect (now, particularly!) stimulated and excited me. I knew posi-



tively there must be an immense deal of under-life going on behind a lot of those impassive flat French quarter adobe walls. And that, inevitably, would also suggest there must be a lot of spying and sleuthing going on, only the fraction of a breath behind the secret and deadly intricacies of the under-life. Sleuthing! . . .

Yes, I owlishly figured to myself — Crime! If ever city this side of perdition would be apt to have an able force of private detectives in it, the Queen City of the South — righto — I would lay a little confident bet on polyglot and negroid New Orleans! . . .

So, then, in pursuance of that one uncanceled item, I strolled into a bright Canal Street saloon and ordered a glass of hock, negligently sipping it at the bar. My cap more or less adequately covered the bandaged crown. I had swabbed off and dried the collars of inner and outer coats, changed the clothes underneath. The recent blood-letting, too, seemed actually to have been salutary, body and mind. I was on tiptoe for the hunt, keener and fitter of pulse than I had been in months. . . . Those profane and hideous, suspended, blind-alley months! Perhaps I exaggerate the effects of the blood-letting. This just having something direct and pointed to do may have entered appreciably into the case.

Well. It was getting by now toward ten o'clock. Presently came an interval in my saloon researches when I stood for a moment alone in a considerable empty space along the bar. I leaned comfortably; and dropped into converse, casual and laconic, with the spruce Irish drink-mixer across the counter. By rakish aid of my cap, I might make a passable shift at a race-track man. Why not? I tried.

And so—"What's the good word a stranger down here ought to know about things?"

A pregnant exchange of glances. All right. That went.

"Front office men, especially?" And, oh, yes, too, by the by — private detectives? What about private detectives, say? A big, game, wide-open sporting town like this! It ought to be a rattling crib for the elbows generally. But me — I had a peculiar interest in the private brand. Did they work much down here?

I conceived myself to be playing this rather foxily. And, indeed, the bartender proved instantly responsive. Sure, sure! There was a *raft* of private detectives down here! Did I think them heathens at all? He laughed. And *work*? Why, he had seen a dozen private detectives be in and out of this very place, in the course of a day. Jean Kennedy himself! Ah, there was one for you, on your soul! Little Jean Kennedy — him that the boys both admired and hated, with his charmed slippery life — the snail-eating soft-shoe laddybuck!

My friend offered me topheavy odds — any odds, be heavens, I choose to mention — that New York at its flossiest had nothing to touch Jean Kennedy. I lifted my eyebrows (without jiggling the rakish cap too much), and permitted myself to be edged away. Then I drifted out to remoter bars, and repeated the formula. Always it was the same. Jean Kennedy, Jean Kennedy! He must regularly be a Monsieur Dupin. Other men and other agencies in town might demand an incidental reference, from those brusque sociological experts among the parti-colored bottles. But, in the final resort, the issue would infal-

libly narrow down. To the one single individual Jean Kennedy!

Here, manifestly, was my *hombre*. I struck back to the hotel, and promptly wrote and posted Mr. Jean Kennedy a line. Then I turned in for a brief blessed six hours of sleep; still, unbroken, unhaunted by feverish dreams. . . . My poor girl, with her white face — my poor half-mad girl! At least to-night I was sleeping in the same common city with her!

Next morning, punctual to the minute of my nine o'clock appointment, I stopped in at Jean Kennedy's dingy box of a Magazine Street office. In the light, uncertain and dusty, from an areaway window, I saw a pudgy, vital, globular little man; very pink; very personally spick-and-span; who smiled and rubbed his hands, you were inclined to hazard, just a mite over the reasonable retail-trade limit. I did not like it. This was no Monsieur Dupin. The first sight of him — of that famous Jean Kennedy — fool, forthwith it sent me bitterly slack and depressed. Deuce take my foxiness and the sociological experts! I squirmed in my chair, in two minds about broaching our terrible business to him.

Then, all at once, I discovered that while those full red lips were smiling at me, and the soft hands being unctuously rubbed, the tiny gimlets of black eyes had me fastened in an uncanny fixity of attention. *Me* — he was doing a bit of quite unnecessary probing about into *me*! I waked sharp up, disconcerted. Dapper — what? Gay? The external manner, so perfectly native and unforced in the fellow — why, it was a mask, complete, invaluable. No more, no less.

And the fatness, too — the chubby roundness of

paunch! Could you fancy a roly poly sleuth, a Santa Claus sleuth? Yet it needed even as unpromising a quality as this to muffle up the beggar's astonishing speed and assurance of movement. I soon made out, in effect, that everything about Mr. Jean Kennedy boded well for my job. He had palpable French blood in him back somewhere, moreover; and I always got on with men of such strain. Loosing brakes, I dumped virtually my whole chaotic burden of the past months down in a heap before him. He smiled and rubbed his hands. Within twenty minutes I had persuaded him to thrust all his other routine work of the day aside and devote himself purely to me.

"I reckon," he agreed, nodding. "Just so, it can be done." He swung to his desk. "Right with you, sir, then." And, as he scribbled—"You think the girl at the cathedral last night knew who you were."


"How can one help thinking that? It seems strange. Yet why else should she put the dog on me? Or throw the knife?"

He tucked his papers away, shut the drawer of the desk and took up his hat. "All ready. Now, where is the knife?"

I produced it from my overcoat pocket. Bright and early in the morning I had been out to a curio-pawnshop and got a leather sheath for it. I meant to keep this souvenir; to cherish it; to carry it; to add it to my armory.

Jean Kennedy received the young bowie, sans scabbard, from my outstretched fingers; and deftly gauged and balanced it, sucking in his cheeks, his large fleshy head askew, the tiny sloe-black eyes narrowed.

"Just so," he murmured. "A girl's knife. Small



enough to be stuck in the garter, yet —" He shrugged and returned the pretty memento to me. "Well, well. We shall see."

I told him of my un-American plan to pack it—the lady Camorrista's trinket—hereafter.

"Yes? And this Rafael Doerck, now? Or Lafe Duke? What is it your idea to do, when we have found him to-day?—if we should have the great good luck to find him!"

"Do? Drop him. In his tracks. On the spot."

The little man laughed (or pretended to laugh) till he shook. "Fine! That would be fine for me, eh? And what about my respectability, then? And my profession? And my poor life, by the sacrament! 'Extry, extry! Jean Kennedy convicted of conspiracy and murder!' 'Extry! Jean Kennedy hanged at Baton Rouge!'"

"You rout out the boy," I said. "I'll try to tend to the rest."

"Just so. Well, well. Come along, Mr. Hainlen. We shall see. We haven't caught him up yet,—ha, ha!—have we? Eh? Let me lock the door behind me. There is nothing to steal, but I am old-fashioned. Now!"

It was a long and toilsome day of threading many tangled streets—that; concentrated, illuminating. My head throbbed painfully. But the little smiling fat detective—Jove, how tireless! Only once did he slow up. This was for a very excellent and ample noonday breakfast, eaten in a queer restaurant, French and homely, beloved of gourmets, down by the Market. He had earned anything he liked by then.

First of all, we went to Rocco Bordaglione's; to the

Hotel Riviera. Which is to say, to begin with, we circled unostentatiously about that drab-plastered place, until I had quite definitely identified it. Yes, there was the tree-shadowed back wall on the alley, with the stout ungrilled door. Not a question — the scene of my last night's exploit with the dog! I had done much thinking over things since the rum bout; and, on top of the widening import of Miss Lakeland's story, had already come to suspect this as a distinct possibility.

Now, after fully satisfying ourselves (even to the blood spots), Jean Kennedy and I entered Rocco's joint together from the front, as ordinary chance patrons; asking for vermouth to drink and engaging the pousy proprietor in talk. It was an opening. Only, from the guarded and wary feeling out, we were in two minutes down to holds.

What a joy to observe my detective's style! Rocco, of course, did not have to be introduced to him, any more than he had to be introduced to the curling-mustached Piedmontese. You could perceive with half an eye — the rankest outsider could perceive it — how powerfully the little fat free-lance of the law impressed the other big fat one, the "hotel-keeper." From my vantage of the inside, assuredly, I sensed the flying oblique shafts of antagonism, alarm, authority, as incessantly they played back and forth through the tense air between them. A detached mind might have enjoyed the sport.

Rocco, though, let me hasten to publish, seemed very strong to do everything in his quaint province to assist us. He was extremely cut up over the loss of his dog; his most excellent watchdog; his Tito. He led us

back into the hotel courtyard, past his cockpit and the series of gorgeous preening fowls, to where the carcass of that excellent Tito lay stark in a corner.

Tito, it appeared, was a simple cross between a Texas sheep-herder's indiscriminate collie bitch and a wild lobo. That accounted at a stroke for the nice peculiarity of his temper. "*Lobito*," the girl had affectionately called him. Rocco mournfully protested how he had served this house as a very exceptional watchdog indeed — which I could well credit! A hungry Bengal tiger might have done better. But he would have been hard put to it.

Contemplatively (yet also rather viciously, perhaps), I kicked Tito now with my heavily shod toe. The shiny .32 Smith and Wesson had at any rate been enough for *one* mongrel whelp! . . .

"And this?" I suddenly enquired of Bordaglione, whisking out my memento, the last evening's knife.

He regarded it glumly. "Ah, yes, my friends. Catalina! I ought, in fact, to know that stiletto. I gave it to her on the afternoon of a fiesta; and the same night she tried to use it on me — my heart! She is a devil, comprehend." (For me, I had thought of her only as an *emissary* of the devil, though I was quite willing to accept the emendation.) "She will probably slit my throat now, for this morning's work — for the entertainment of you two gentlemen!"

Nevertheless, risking the harsh contingency of hurt to our host, we stayed on at the Hotel Riviera a goodish while (though Kennedy would not deign to breakfast there); and Rocco was eventually able to convince us he had had no hand in the last night's affair. Why, on his sacred honor, gentlemen — what was this Catalina

K Cruz woman to him? Slut, she had deserted him — already several weeks ago — for another man! Until yesterday, as anybody could tell you, she had been flaunting herself and living with that new cavalier of hers on their fashionable Royal Street!

A Such was the report on every lip. Verify it for yourselves, gentlemen. He promptly gave us the Royal Street address; though, mind, he predicted we would never find Catalina innocently smoking her cigarettes in that unholy bed to-day. Not her — not Catalina! Not likely! She was too cute. . . . Ah, these soulless, bowelless women!

E But this was all he knew, and all he wanted to know. He had no slightest fear, comprehend, of Lafe Duke — the accursed young bandit! On the contrary, he defied that one — in his teeth! The girl, though — Catalina? Oh, yes, gentlemen — undoubtedly, he admitted it — he feared Catalina. He feared her very profoundly.

E And why, did you ask? Because she was a woman — that was why! Because she was like all women. Treacherous as a cat. See what she had done on him last night!

E And would she, for example, lawfully give up the keys of his establishment, as any honest creature should, when she had left him, after the great fight of the chickens? (Ah, gentlemen, you should only have been here to behold that fight!)

E Catalina? Give up those keys? Bah! The thing had never occurred to her. And now she was trying to get him into trouble with the police. Slut! He had most magnanimously provided her with a key for both the front and the back of his humble hotel; and see,

she still had them! He hoped she might somehow beneficently be pushed into the river, and the keys sink and drown her! His own modest but sincere life might thereby be spared.

More and more indignant he waxed, as his restraint before us thinned away.

And the shots last night? He had heard no shots. To be sure, he had not been home at that hour. He never was home then — Catalina knew it. But his people were here, and they had heard no shots. None of them. They had heard nothing at all. It was winter, you would comprehend, and the house tightly shuttered up.

As for Catalina's coming *into* the house? . . . You could gamble that Catalina would not attempt that — not try to come into the hotel! His people had orders. They would attend to such effrontery as that! But, anyway, she had not tried. She must just have lurked about in the black courtyard until she had made dead certain I was gone. Then — pouf! — she had slipped out again as she had so impudently broken in, through the door in his back wall. He had known nothing, nothing. There, merely — there, this morning — there his people had discovered poor Tito, lying stiff and blood-stained and dead, in the sun-flecks of the alleyway!

It was too bad. He would never be able to secure another so brave and so useful a watchdog as Tito. A hotel needed a watchdog. Yes, Catalina had herself loved Tito passionately, and he her. They were both alike. A wonderful girl, gentlemen, with all her devilry — Catalina! She could do anything with animals. His chickens would come clucking and crowd-

ing up about her. She fed them. And she had often fed Tito, also. Ah, she knew well how to make friends with the birds and animals!

But now she had fallen head-over-heels in love with that squinting upstart of a boy. Where in gehenna did he come from — that boy? A complete mystery! Nobody knew at all.

"Just so," interrupted Kennedy, at this stage. "We'll be going now. But we're coming back, you'll be pleased to hear, Mr. Bordaglione. And we'd be obliged to you, brother, if you'd have some trifling scrap of news for us, when we come. Why not treat yourself to a little promenade about the neighborhood? You might be able to pick up something."

Rocco didn't take to that, especially. But Kennedy laughed, and shook a plump pink forefinger at him; and the big Piedmontese pulled a reluctant grin, and saluted the command.

There was no earthly question, you understand, as to the chicken fancier's being thoroughly peevish with his ex-girl. She had cost him a lot of money, in her time; and had then coolly proceeded to scarify and humiliate him. By her, he had lost his best game cock, Comandante. Now it was Tito. And, above all, she had somehow ingeniously contrived to get this bland Jean Kennedy on his trail. He recognized perfectly that his trail would not endure such scrutiny as the beady-eyed Jean could bring to bear on it.

But we had our own problems, and hurried away down the crooked off-street. Much waited ahead. And the city was wide, and the light of February not too long. My scalp burned, the bones ached. I thought continually of a stricken white figure on a

hospital bed. "Can I be the wife — of two men? . . ."

Well, then, place by place, this day, the detective and I most carefully went over all the suggestive ground. We visited the gambler's empty lodgings on Royal Street; old French negress La Femme's semi-prison house by the Market; Enrique Herrera's cottage down at the edge of Chalmette. We talked with half a dozen people who had seen the "great" fight of the game-cocks. Herrera showed us Caro Chico, the young gray conqueror of that notorious and romantic battle, and the fifty dollars in gold Duke had paid him for his efforts. Kennedy, also, looked in at the servants' quarters of the Hôtel Dieu, to try to get a line on the spy system which had evidently been in operation over me while I was there.

A fairly close search of it, on the whole, I fancy we made, with no single moment of the burdened and fleeting hours wasted. We accumulated hints. Yet never were we able to put our fingers on anything positive, specific. Doerck had obviously not mislaid his smooth western trick of covering up his tracks.

In the late afternoon, we returned to the unsavory Hotel Riviera, where proprietor Rocco welcomed us again with a wry smirk. No, so far, he owned, he had not had his modest but sincere throat slit.


He confidently expected, though, that he would — before morning, perhaps! Meanwhile — yes, he had been out and run down the glimmer of a piece of news for us. He wouldn't guarantee it, comprehend. He offered it only for what it might be worth. The source was a woman — one of Catalina's bosom friends. So how, in the name of all the saints, could he vouch for

it? But — a shrug — such as it was! . . . We listened with pricked ears.

The clew took us down toward the lugger landing. Rather, it took us to the levee only. We did not want to go quite all the way to the luggers. What we had to keep sharp in mind was a smallish green schooner, supposed to be in the Gulf fishing trade, called the *Paquita*. Rocco accurately described the given wharf area in which the *Paquita* would be likely to be found tied up. Her skipper's name was Ramon Guiteras.

And had Ramon the Clubfoot and his fast green fishing schooner — had they an exactly — well, an exactly enviable reputation, you comprehend, gentlemen? Ah! The Piedmontese sadly regretted his inability to afford Ramon this kind of tribute. It would not be straight. As a plain matter of fact, "my friends" (to the expressive accompaniment of creased hands, white teeth and sleek, curled, horsehair mustaches), you would do yourself no injustice to tread very soft in the vicinity of the *Paquita*. . . . There! We were warned.

It was growing sufficiently dusk when we embarked on this final enterprise of the day; an evening of chill penetration, not in the least sub-tropical. Kennedy and I worked briskly down to the river, and into our prescribed zone of ticklish activity. The wharf situation, however, was either helped or complicated for us (according to your fancy) by the recent arrival of an up-river bayou steamboat, which had nosed in against the bank just here, littering the broad planked floor of the levee over with its mass of unloaded freight. Big burlap-covered bales of cotton, in particular, lay everywhere thickly strewn about, making the place a nest,



a warren, of black holes and corners. We had to thread our cautious path in and out among these heaps of fat plantation prosperity.

Suddenly, from under our very feet, a woman got up and scudded away down the merchandise-cluttered levee in front of us. It was dark, and she ducked and dodged. But the picture of that other scarfed woman — the mystery woman of last night! . . .

She was nearer Kennedy, as it happened, than me. "Catch her!" I clamored. "Grab her! It's Catalina!"

I may have used the dancing girl's Christian name, perhaps, rather familiarly. And undoubtedly I more guessed at her cheerful identity than actually recognized her. But it was a tolerably safe guess. And the event proved I had made no mistake. Nor had the "bosom friend." The clew! We were off! . . .

If Kennedy's intellectual method with Rocco at the Hotel Riviera had been a joy, so now too was his physical speed and prowess in this wharf impromptu of the obstacle race. Amazing! Lithe and supple, Catalina fled away like a shadowy hare among the dun burlap bales. Only, in a dozen bounds, to be standing stock-still again; overhauled, collared, by that rotund and dapper little detective. It startled one. Before Kennedy could clap his palm across her mouth, however, she had yelped out something in Spanish — I could not get the words, though of course they were a signal.

A bad second, I came closing in on them, and thrust the muzzle of my new .41 Colt's firm up against Catalina's back. She seemed to wear no stays, and she must have felt the threatening cold tube through her

wraps with unequivocal distinctness. Indeed, I think I buried the barrel of that revolver in her lower ribs virtually up to the sight.

She winced. My brain — or something in me — was pounding. "Wife . . . wife of two men!"

"All right," I muttered hoarsely. "Let her go, Kennedy. If she cares a straw about living two minutes longer, she'll lead me quietly on down to the schooner, or to wherever Duke is. You stick here — near enough at hand, somewhere, to back me up." I put a pound of added pressure on to the revolver-butt. "March!"

It was a raw night, I say; and the levee practically deserted. The white bayou steamboat, with fires drawn, loomed ghostly through the bleak dark of the river mist. I saw no negro idlers among the cotton bales, no singing roustabouts — nobody at all but one old graybeard watchman; who, with his suspicious dog, now came hastily shuffling up to us.

Kennedy would talk to him. Resolutely I pushed Catalina ahead of me, at the revolver's point, toward the green schooner — or whatever it was we were going toward. The Colt's, dull in color, did not show in the operation. Now, too, however, mighty heedfully, I reached my free hand in under the opposite arm and slipped the shiny little Smith and Wesson out from its holster into my bottom overcoat pocket. Thus, a gun in each fist, I trod taut on Catalina's reluctant heels.

"Duke," I whispered once. "Is he on the *Paquita*?"

She snapped back — "Ask Ramon the Clubfoot that!"

"Well, then," I suggested, "just move along a bit



smarter, will you?" And I punched the end of the revolver tube another fraction into her ribs.

As we neared the river's edge, the level planked floor of the levee broke away into a long obtuse-angled incline, also smooth and planked, which extended into the very flow of the brown current. Down this slope I followed Catalina toward the murky blot of a sailboat. Soon I could dimly pick out the pair of masts rising above the craft — a schooner, yes — and the fact that her hull paint might conceivably be green. Not the faintest blink of a light was on her. Yet, as we approached, three or four men — or the shadows of three or four — were violently lugging and hauling at lines and poles, trying to get her swung clear into the stream.

"Ahoy!" I shouted, keeping Catalina always meticulously between those debatable deckhands and me. (I had no tincture of shame, believe, about that!) "On board, there! Hold up!"

A guttural Spanish voice, not uncivil, answered my hail. "We go out to the Gulf to fish, sir. What do you want?"

"I want Lafe Duke. . . ."

Was that a tiny rustle of sound behind me? I half-turned.

Crash — blur! I seemed to be falling through all the steeps, all the abysses, of eternity. Millions of raying stars spouted and swirled about me. It was very painful, very inexplicable.

Then I had the sense of drowning, of infinite ice-like water. After that, a celestial easement. Ay, of everything!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SECOND

THE FAULT

The next item of interest that occurred to me was disagreeable in the extreme.

For whatever the preceding incidents of my unlovely cataclysm may have been, they were at any rate better than this gruesome sagging back to consciousness. Sick, wet, aching, half-frozen, I came to with my face on the rough planks of the levee, my body being rigorously pumped and mauled and pummeled by some unknown hands from above. Whether the hands were friendly or inimical did not matter. Nothing mattered — nothing but only the blind hope of pause to that so horrid and reeling discomfort.

A scrap of sigh or groan or exclamation must involuntarily have gurgled out of my mouth along with the tawny Mississippi water. For now the unknown hands above straightened me — ah, the malice of such Chinese tortures! — into a semi-sitting position.

“Bravo!” said a voice. “That’s the ticket, eh? Neither cracked nor drowned!”

“What’s up?” I responded feebly. And then, instantly, discovering I could speak — “O my head!” Which, also on the dot, brought a fresh torrent of muddy water tumbling out of me.

Kennedy (the hands and voice were of course his) kept steadily on at the diabolic work over me; bending

me to and fro, sidewise, up and down; kneading my stomach; twisting and dragging me ruthlessly about; steady but violent, like an inspired machine; till at length pretty much all the river I had contrived to swallow was ejected back on the dripping wharf planks; I miserably protesting with each movement. "Mercy, mercy!" "For God's sake, wait!" "Oh, let me be!"

I retched and begged and whimpered. Such insensate activity, I tried to point out! It could only add the more insupportable pain and vertigo to that sufficient which I already had.

Then a second man arrived on the black scene, puffing, labored; a man with a dog. It was the old steamboat watchman; and, between Kennedy and him, they carried me up the levee slope to the top. The watchman, I mazily gathered, had been off somewhere on the hunt for a carriage. Very presently that saving vehicle came clattering along over the hollow boards; and they bundled me into it, my head hanging and my teeth knocking a fine tune; and Kennedy climbed in after me. He leaned out for a last insistent word — my able nurse did — with the watchman, then merrily we jolted away!

In our long preliminary chat of the morning, I had not failed, understand, to mention to Kennedy the little séance with Doctor Blondel in my hotel room the night before. So now the clever and managing fat detective took me straight to Doctor Blondel's office on Carondelet Street. Most fortunately, too, the doctor was in. Soon they had me stretched on a couch in his consulting-room, stripped and covered with blankets. The inquisition of movement was over.

Despite throb and nausea and general wretchedness, I couldn't help reacting, couldn't help vaguely coming on to feel myself a shade more human and possible again.

"Well, young man," I heard the doctor say, at about this stage, "somebody certainly seems to have a grudge against your skull."

I opened my eyes — I could now, without swooning. "Where's Kennedy?"

"Never you mind Kennedy. He was wet, too. He's gone in the hack."

That settled me. And very content I was, not a doubt, to be settled. If they wouldn't let me — why, dash it all, what use to worry? — they wouldn't let me!

So, then, after those careful firm fingers had patched and swathed up my battered places, I lay quite still on the slippery leather couch; for an interminable while; naked as a baby; lapped in my heavenly soft blankets. When other patients began to arrive (and it was by this Doctor Blondel's regular evening office hours), they simply wheeled me — somebody did — couch and all, into an adjoining private room.

From shivering with cold, I had now turned to fever. Drowsiness overcame me. I dreamed vilely, half-waked, dozed and dreamed again. When eventually I did fully rouse, pudgy Jean Kennedy and the doctor were standing together and whispering, under dim gas-light, above me.

"What time?" I asked.

"Eleven o'clock."

I made an honest stagger to get up, but Doctor Blondel, curt and authoritative, waved me back. "Not

yet," he said. "You're all right, nothing serious. Rest, rest — that's the word, that's the one and only word. Keep flat down, don't stir. Now, I have to go out on a visit. Perhaps Mr. Kennedy will amuse you till my return. Then, if you like, I'll be pleased to take you along over to your hotel."

He lighted more gas in the chandelier, bowed and quitted us. Kennedy, grinning and suavely rubbing his hands, with nifty dry clothes on him and an adequate dinner obviously under his swelling waistband — Kennedy drew up a wicker chair and companionably sat himself beside me. While he struck a match for his cigarette, I was pouring out a fire of incoherent and tremulous questions.

"Steady," he cautioned. "Just so — one at a clip. What was it? A rattling stiff belt alongside the head! There you have it all, sir." He inhaled blissfully. "You take too many chances. It doesn't pay. But you're pulling round, you're pulling round. And we'll collect your man yet, sir — tree him against the sky, like bloodhounds baying a nigger. I reckon! Where you can count on a lady — ha, ha! — on a lady's being mixed up in the job, eh? —"

To myself, my mind creakingly fabricated — "Then Doerck got clean away."

Aloud I amended — "*Was* it Doerck?"

"I don't know who it was. Queer things have happened on that levee before this, sir. Powerful! Still, I ain't denying anybody's suspicions."

"He clouted a friend of mine like that once," I muttered. "A Swede cook. With the butt of a Winchester. What did he hit me with?"

The great Jean Kennedy laughed. "I couldn't see.

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No silk stocking filled with wind, eh? A guard-stake, a capstan-bar, a telegraph-pole!"

"It must have been a jolt. Did it roll me all the way, bang, into the river?"

"No. That was after you went down. He kicked and kneed and razzled you out into the river after you went down."

I shut my eyes, clenched my teeth, lay very quiet. It seemed a long road — my score with this interesting boy.

"And he got away? Scot-free — absolutely?"

"The girl, too. Both of 'em. Absolutely."

"Tell me. I promise not to interrupt."

He nodded. "Just so. That's it. Let's see — I'll go back to the beginning, then, eh? To the hitch when you left me standing cold among the mess of steamboat freight. You oughtn't ever to have left me, sir, you know. There was the watchman, wasn't there? — I had to stay on and give some kind of explanation of ourselves to him. He'd have been whistling for the cops. He didn't have any more idea who we were than a rabbit.

"It took time for me to satisfy him; not much, but enough. You and the girl had got ahead. You couldn't have wasted a minute, eh? I had to run to catch up. Even so, I was a hundred or a hundred and fifty yards behind. Bad management, sir; bad policy. You walked right into a hole, with your back as uncovered as a baby's! Bad.

"You'd stopped by then, though. Had taken to calling off to the people aboard the schooner. I could hear you, just faintly make out the blur where you stood. It was beside an old wobbled mooring-post for steam-

boats. Three piles lashed together, sticking up above the level of the wharf. I reckon you didn't bother about any trifle like remarking that cluster of three leaning piles? . . . No. I thought not.

"Well, there you were — standing close by this old slued mooring-post; altogether *too* devilish close! And the piles being in a triangle — so — they build up a nice notched hiding-crib for a man." He shrugged. "To-night the man was sure on deck, eh?"

"As I plugged along toward you, I spied him step out and swing a club. From behind, of course. He looked big to me — big and well-muscled and fast. I heard the nasty thud of the wood on your knob. And down you buckled, like a steer.

"Then he filed his club — the fellow did — and jumped for you, on the crouch; and kicked and clawed and tipped you off into the river. He worked quick. Maybe he suspected me, though I don't think he saw or heard a sign. When you were safe out of the way — and the girl was doing what she could to help, mind, all the while — when you were safe scuttled, the two of 'em ducked. They never tried to get on to Ramon's boat, but just legged it as hard as they could together, down the levee, toward the luggers."

Couldn't he then, at least, have taken a shot at the crook? Naturally. And winged him, too, in all probability. But why should he? Why, indeed! Had he committed himself, in the arrangement with me, to any such program of radical killings? Emphatically not! He was no officer of the law. He had to mind his p's and q's, exactly like another private citizen. The police would as unhesitatingly bag him for murder

as they would a dealer in women, a gambler or a wharf roustabout.


Besides, I had so strongly impressed our motives of secrecy on him. Even if he had been willing to risk shooting a man (which distinctly he was not), still, he couldn't do it without being hauled up and having the whole ghastly business aired to the limit in court.

All this, you understand, inside me, very shadowy and covert and toilsome. For him — he made no slightest effort to excuse himself, but was smilingly going on with the story.

"I had to give some mighty prompt attention to you, about then. When I first reached the water's edge — not a ripple, not a bubble, from you in sight anywhere! I skedaddled back and forth along the brink, squatted low, peered. Suddenly you bobbed up, just for a second. No struggle, no splashing — nothing! Down you plopped again. And out — already you'd slipped out fully far enough into the stream.

"Very good. When I had towed you in — I knew you couldn't be quite drowned yet, though there was a fair chance your skull might be cracked — anyway, I took the time to say four words to Ramon Guiteras. 'You cut that schooner loose from the bank,' I said, 'and before you can clear the town lights, I'll be after you in a tug.' He got the point of the argument right smart, and ordered his crew to swing a line ashore and hold her.

"But you can bet your breeches they didn't offer, eh? — none of 'em — to lend me a hand with you! Ha, ha — not aboard the *Paquita* — not much! So I had to sing out for the old steamboat watchman." He



flipped the end of his cigarette into the empty grate, and rose brisk on padded feet. "I reckon I won't wait for Doctor Blondel now, sir, if you don't care," he observed. "I ought to be moving, before it works round too late. I'll drop in to see you at the hotel in the morning."

I tried to thank him for scooping me out of the river; but he was determined to get quick away. Didn't he really know what had become of Doerck and Catalina? — I demanded.

"Not yet. The pot's a-boiling. I hope to, soon."

He briefly explained: he had feelers out. Therefore it was necessary for him to spreadeagle sharp back to the French side. Something might have developed. Ramon the Clubfoot was still tied up to the levee. But he practically couldn't dangle the police over these people any more (he had used the last of his resources there); and they wouldn't be long in finding this out. The old river watchman, even. He gave him — Kennedy — the devil of a trouble, that old watchman did! He insisted on taking his lively disclosures of the evening to headquarters. Kennedy had had to spike his mouth with one of my gold-pieces.

Well, I, meantime, was mostly thinking of the marvel of my not having blown a hole the size of a silk hat in the lithe back of Catalina Cruz. The odds were a thousand to nothing an unexpected slam over the sconce like that would set off the stablest trigger-finger (which mine made no pretense of being) man ever bent on a gun. Yet evidently — evidently, somehow, this had missed. Believe, I then and there put up a sincere little vote of gratitude to my presiding star. I may have cherished aspirations in a rather rum or so de-

partment of life, in my day; but never, I suppose, as a slaughterer of women from behind!


Ugh! . . . What had *become* of my revolvers, by the bye? I detained Kennedy again to ask him about that.

From his overcoat pocket he produced the familiar shiny young .32. "Revolvers? Twisted up in your fingers in the water, this one was. That's all the revolver I saw."

I described the blued .41 Colt's, but he shook his head. No doubt it was gone; picked up by Catalina or Doerck; or else galvanically flung out by my own hand and buried in the rich alluvial slime at the bottom of the river — de Soto's disillusioned and turbid spring river of three centuries ago, in which I now too, with my poor girl, had been baptized. How our experiences paralleled, touched! . . .

Kennedy said good-by; and, dapper and rolypoly, in his extraordinarily agile fashion, waddled away through the door. Doctor Blondel did not crop up for another hour. Then it was with a glass of a very handsome Burgundy in his hand. A colored boy too, following close on his heels, brought in my clothes, all nicely dried and pressed. Even the heavy Montana winter boots had been softened and oiled.

The doctor humorously helped me to dress; a slow procedure, yet not so outrageously bad, either. For the gulp of Burgundy, on my empty stomach, did wonders. You will perhaps remember how, since last night, I had been wearing a wad of cotton strapped on to the back of my head, under my cap. It was thanks to Catalina's knife-nick, then, that this lump of cotton, this generous if unpicturesque surgical pad,



had saved me from the worst of the levee wallop. But for such a queer slant of protection, Doctor Blondel affirmed, the smash on my crown might easily enough have done for me.

No need now, however, to go into the potentialities of all that. It hadn't. I was able to dress; and, by liberal use of the doctor's arm, to walk to his carriage at the door. Snug abed he saw me in my hotel room — Blondel did; then, though the clock was nearer one than twelve, he sent out for a bowl of fine thick soup, with bay leaves, and heaven knows what other savory things besides, in it. Blessed soup, I pledge myself; life-giving, an inspiration of the soul! I got away with it, to the ultimate scraped-up spoonful.

Nor in my letter-box, either, had I been disappointed. There was my wire answer from Birk Lanchard, ready and waiting; a gust of hearty well-wishing words, promising me anything to the farthest stretch of his "humble" power. How loyal people were! And this Doctor Blondel, now. He still betrayed literally no curiosity in the history of the two accidents which had thrown me under his hands. A calm and superior gentleman of the old school he was, Creole to the core; and, as he did not require the confidence of me, I did not attempt to offer it, then or later. When he had gone to-night, and my lights were out, I lay (with Birk's friendly telegram under my pillow) and thought concentratedly of Eloise for five minutes. From that, I plunged far into a deep and invigorating sabbath of sleep.


And now, I may say, the crowded New Orleans episode was about over. For another two weeks, or until I had loafed back into something like passable

everyday form, I lived on at the St. Charles Street hotel. Between Birk and me, and our pair of fixed addresses, we managed the exchange of telegrams with Miss Lakeland so as, at any rate, to escape detection. It mayn't have been Machiavelli; but it did. By the time Birk had also received a couple of detailed long letters from me, he knew virtually as much what to do on any given occasion as I would have known myself. Through him, too, I communicated with my own family in Pittsburgh. A frightful and involved sequence of lying we soon found ourselves let in for; and I can only swear that we both loathed every instant, every scurvy fresh step, in the malignant development of it! . . .

But, the main issue, you ask — Rafe Doerck?

That is exceedingly simple. Zero! Kennedy had shortly to come to me and confess himself at a dead cold fault. Trail? There was none. After delivering the welt on my head, and racing with Catalina down the dark levee toward the luggers, the boy had vanished — pouf! — like a curl of smoke. If the treacherous slimy mud at the bottom of the river had swallowed up my revolver, so, for aught we could show to the contrary, might it have swallowed up Doerck. In two scouring and faithful weeks, we were able to rout out not a single living trace of him. The failure abased Kennedy to the dust.

With Catalina Cruz, to be sure, we had better luck. There was, in fact, no difficulty about Catalina at all. On that first night, immediately after quitting me at Doctor Blondel's office, Kennedy had run square into her. It was plain sailing, carried to the point of the startling, the inexplicable. For the Spanish dancer girl (or whatever the deuce she called herself) sat



vivaciously laughing and chattering with a group of her sort in one of the most popular of the Royal Street cafés. Naïve as milk, insolent as brass! The notion of hiding seemed preposterously remote from her.

Kennedy took her straight in charge; plied her with his best skill, silky and biting. But if she did then really know anything of Doerck's whereabouts, she was adroit enough to keep the information tight locked up behind her brothel tongue. For my part, I am invincibly inclined to doubt if she knew. I believe Doerck must now once for all have realized that I meant business. His wharf ambush had tripped up; and, with Jean Kennedy hunting along on the track with me, the danger was express and acute. This being the case, he would, if I guessed him right, ditch Catalina without an eye-flick of hesitation, the ghost of a sign.

My theory was, of course, that the fellow owned the true crook's instinct. He would grasp the disadvantages of having a woman tied to him at this moment just as graphically as Jean Kennedy could. Perhaps he had made an arrangement to meet the girl somewhere after a while. Which, though, needn't especially concern us. Only, I am feeling about for a way to account for Catalina's mood of amiability, her high spirits. She was not one to brook desertion by a lover tamely, under any conditions; and her services to Doerck latterly had been trying, and rather considerable.


Plenty of money she seemed to have now; which largesse she spent gayly, recklessly; dancing a good deal, with the wildest abandon. Presently she began to be seen at the Hotel Riviera again. Before I left

New Orleans, she was living in Rocco Bordaglione's charming flat-faced casa regularly. I don't attempt to explain the situation. Not a leading word of jealousy or spite could she be got to say against Doerck — that's all. This lack of perfidy, venom, was uncanny; the more so, if she knew nothing. It confounded us.

Well, Kennedy circled about for the lost scent in every possible direction. The handicap of our aloofness from the police, though, was always wickedly frustrating him. By this, there couldn't have been a soul in any degree connected with our affair but recognized his or her prison immunity perfectly. It was a personal duel between two men — so the whisper spread — with the idea of honor involved. That told the pretty story. Kennedy chafed. He twisted and turned, only to find a piece of ordinary underworld shadowing boosted by such report to the heights of the fairly superhuman.

As my head grew gradual bit by bit steadier, I went about with him constantly. I saw Catalina Cruz; talked with her again and again; and with all the others who had contributed anything to the sum of our monstrous lovers' woe. I made very full notes, writing half the night in a large leather-bound journal which I bought. If serious mishap should ever actually befall me — death — I wanted Eloise to understand at least as much as I could by this cold means convey to her.

Also, it is perhaps worth mentioning, as a touch of sympathetic analogy, that she was these same days engaged in precisely the same task. With my visit to the Hôtel Dieu, her listlessness had abruptly disap-



peared. Soon she lifted up, called for pens and paper; and, as her strength came leaping back (for she was an essentially strong and sound girl), she filled page after page with writing, for my eyes alone. Neither of us had a guess of the other's eager preoccupation. Yet, both in New Orleans — there we wrote and wrote! Thirty years later, I do but faintly re-echo many of those haunted pages.

The sheer wantonness of the dreadful barrier between us! . . . Though I was there in New Orleans then only under the strictest cover, none the less, except for that one first day of my clubbing, never a twenty-four hours went by I did not at any rate catch a glimpse of my darling's inaccessible window. Her health and temper of mind now improved rapidly, hand over hand: within a week of my arrival in town, Miss Lakeland was able to move her out to a small private hospital by the exhibition-grounds at Audubon Park. It was merely an old-fashioned southern residence — this private sanatorium; and I could win up quite close to the faded red-brick walls of it.


One night I even heard (and wept with restlessness and passionate misery as I heard) the familiar lost music of my girl's voice, the dear lost music of her voice! How it had murmured for me alone through many a Montana dusk hour! . . . Besides the relayed telegrams from Birk Lanchard about her, I could always depend, too, on Kennedy and his agencies for indirect bulletins.

Well, the three of us — Eloise, Miss Lakeland and I — departed from New Orleans on the same day. It seemed Eloise purely and flatly refused to go abroad. Something in her would not admit considering the idea, Miss Lakeland wrote. What — to quit the menace-

fraught country where I remained with our poisonous horror alone? No! She was very willing indeed to fly New Orleans; to go to any practicable strange place, uncontaminated by recent memories. Ah! But she stipulated that it must be within reasonable distance of New York (where the poor child supposed me to be). She — my most single, most constant — *she*, of our summer gulch — “the wife of two men!” . . . And I, powerless as a clown to cut the knot! . . .

So, said Miss Lakeland, they would spend the spring in some quiet corner of Florida, perhaps; traveling thence by way of Cuba. I watched them from the levee that early March afternoon as they boarded the Havana boat. Very near to the landing-stage I stood, though indistinguishably muffled up and hidden from them. My heart all but suffocated me with its pounding as they passed. The tall slim girl — her pallor, the lustrous obsidian-black hair, the droop of the sweet and tragic modesty of carriage — how my wretched blank eyes fed on her!

All of which brings me, lastly, to my dream. I know it is tedious, weak-minded (not to say comic), to go about expounding one's beastly dreams. Heaven help us, what am I drifting into? Yet this thing was so vivid, so definite and authentic — Jove, it became as real and instant a part of my consciousness as any physical experience I had ever undergone! Literally, yes — I must risk the absurdity of setting it down, that dream.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THIRD

MY DREAM, AND AFTER

It took place (I am speaking now of this great dream of mine) the night before Eloise and Miss Lakeland were to sail. I had not made any new plan for myself yet. I was thoroughly discouraged.

After having ridden out to Audubon Park in the evening, and paced furtively about for half an hour there, within sight of my girl's dim yellow window, I returned to the hotel and my lonely room. The hall clock then said but nine-thirty. So I unlocked my journal from a bag, and wrote steadily; unbosoming, losing, myself in it, till solid eleven. I was always finding endless tags and angles of things to say. Not content with simply trying to kill a man, I must in addition try to write a philosophical treatise on Life!

At eleven, however, I flung down the pen and lay back. Though my head was practically all right again by now, yet this whole disastrous hang-fire business of the chase had me harassed and wearied to the last bearable degree. To have been keyed up to concert pitch like that — only for nothing! Good God! My nerves were as jumpy as a cat's. But to-night I felt sure I could sleep. Quickly I undressed and slid into bed.

And, in fact, I must at once have dropped off. For when next I came to my proper self (clammy and beaded with sweat), and sprang convulsed out of bed, and lighted my gas, the hands of my dependable Swiss


watch read twenty minutes past eleven! A scant twenty minutes, all told! I could hardly believe my staring and frightened eyes.

Meantime, this is what had been happening me. I don't know where the dream locality was. Somewhere in the foothills of the Pinto Basin, obviously. But I could not identify the exact spot. All I specifically remembered of that was my standing atop of a characteristic sage-strewn little western knoll, watching a huge band of sheep approach. I suppose there must be a million such knolls in Montana.

The band neared rapidly. Then, to my immense consternation, I discovered that the creatures I had taken to be sheep were not sheep in the least. They were men; running on all fours like sheep; covered with gray alkali dust and blatting like sheep; with even the disgusting woolly sheep smell. But, none the less, they were men! Silly scampering men — by the thousands!

An ironic tinge of amusement tempered my dismay. The bizarre herd swept on. Then I peered closer, and behold, a new revelation! Though men, these sheep-like anomalies were not just men in general. Not at all! The entire crazy band, running along, belly to the earth, was composed of innumerable replicas of two particular men; two men I had known, moderately well; Mickey Devine and Nigger Bill Jackson! They were black sheep, that is, and white.

But the ones made in the color and form of Nigger Bill Jackson had a curious, a distinctive, feature. Out of the middle of the spine of each of them rose a slight cylindrical protuberance, precisely akin to the jutting of a small chimney out of a roof. More than that,



there was a veritable wisp of smoke fluttering above each tiny chimney!

I held intent, fascinated. On and on the ludicrous wave of gamboling men-sheep rolled. And now I could perceive what those small dark cylinders projecting out of the backs of all the Nigger Bill Jacksons were. They were not chimneys, but *sticks of dynamite*, each with its appropriate piece of lighted and attached fuse! That accounted for the blue wisps of smoke daintily swirling, fluttering, above them!

Nice prospect, when you recalled the mess of the original Nigger Bill! With bated breath, I stood there on my neutral hummock and marked those ominous fuses burn low and low.

Then, one by one and hundred by hundred, the explosions! I say "explosions." Yet, beyond the continuous foolish ground bass of the blatting, I was unable to hear any hint of sound. Not, by Jove, to the extent of the report of a nursery pop-gun!

But *see* — oh, murder, the infinite detail — how I could see! Each trip the terrific detonation of the nitro-glycerine was suggested to my eyes by the flames, the violent flare-back, the rank spirt of murky fumes; and by the utter annihilation of that individual sheep. No other sheep ever seemed touched or disturbed by the shock, though; and even that special Nigger Bill Jackson sheep itself was touched only in an extraordinary and capricious kind of fashion.


It blew up, undoubtedly. Instead of flying apart, however, into gruesome torn and bleeding fragments, as you might expect, it merely blew up into a cloud of perfect miniature young Bill Jackson sheep, which placidly floated about in the dusty air like toy balloons!

Blatting Athenas and the noble brain of Zeus! What delicious rot!

Gradually, gradually, these floating sheep-manikins would in their turn settle to earth, growing swiftly larger in the descent; till, by the time they had squeezed back into the ruck of the band, each had attained to full size and identical appearance with its defunct solo ancestor — stick of dynamite, burning fuse and all! The process was incessant; and so fast and furious did the explosions follow one upon another that soon the white Mickey Devine sheep were completely choked out, and it seemed the Nigger Bill Jackson horde must overflow and engulf the world.

But I did not have long to worry about that. The enormous grotesque band, always noiselessly exploding and reproducing itself, split and went by me on both sides. And now I arrive at the significant point (if indeed any of it may be stretched to the point of significance) in the brief lunatic carnival of childish nightmare. I spied the herder.

He was a wonderful wrinkled, curly old buck sheep — the herder; a thoroughbred Merino whose ears I had often enough rubbed in the home-ranch pens down on the Swallowfork. Now he trailed gravely along behind his man-band; walking upright on hind legs, as they ran bestial on all fours; his head severely bowed in thought; a tall staff clipped between the cloven toes of his right forefoot. He had the most astonishing resemblance to one's inner picture (carried up from childhood) of the desert sheik, the oriental patriarch. Not those redoubtable wide spiral horns themselves could avail to contradict the feeling. Sheep and shepherd he was, in toto; a naïve prehistoric symbol, carved



on the walls of some sand-smoothed eastern temple or tomb; a perverse New World survival out of the book of Genesis, or Exodus, at the very latest. He impressed me.

But I was rapidly becoming accustomed to the eccentricities of dream states. For example, instead of dogs, to help him work the band, the patriarchal Merino buck had a pair of horses, which galloped frantically back and forth behind his army of men-sheep, nipping and snapping at their nimble heels. One of the pair of horses was a scrag-necked, flea-bitten elderly gray — Crow, by all the cayuse plugs! The other had striking black-and-white splotched markings; a splendid wild piebald. Where had I seen that particular black-and-white paint pony before? Where?

Then the grave wrinkled old buck sheep lifted up his head, and I got another start. Those deep-set burning eyes! And — the strained and fanatical mouth! Riding Bible! . . . Ay, now I knew him. Our horseman John The Baptist — the celebrant of a certain informal firelighted gulch marriage — Scaramouch's friend — the Cross-Arrow 'vangelist and broncobuster! That was it. Mickey Devine, Nigger Bill Jackson, the Merino buck, Crow, the black-and-white pinto and now — Riding Bible!

So! And Scaramouch, too. I have a sort of inkling he must have been somewhere in all this mad rigmarole. But I can't remember the relation, just how. The spot he made on my mind-plate persisted only as a vague blur.

Everything, indeed, began now to fade and blur. The little eminence on which I had stood was gone. The Alice in Wonderland flock of fabulously multi-

plying men-sheep was gone. Soon I could distinguish nothing in the misty chaos but the figure of Riding Bible. And even he had irrationally changed. Except for the formidable broad corkscrew horns and sheep feet (which he still retained), he was again the Riding Bible we had entertained in actual life, not excluding the rare frock coat! A single fresh item had been added to his appearance. In his nose he wore Grandmother Hainlen's flat Norman ring, the same which I had given to Eloise for her wedding token, and which Doerck had torn off her finger and shied away into the swarthy recesses of his cave. . . . My "lucky" family ring! What next?

In this newest shift of the freak kaleidoscope, Riding Bible sat perched in a high-backed throne, a magisterial chair, that surmounted an austere altar-like rock, rugged and imposing; a fine granite monument out of the heart of the castled mountains. As I had latterly knelt before the altar in the cathedral of St. Louis, so did I now discover myself to be kneeling before this sheer face of rock. But for Riding Bible and the chair and the rock, I seemed alone somewhere on the pinnacle of the world, or of the sky. I peered reverently up. From above, the horned and nose-ringed cowboy, observing me, leaned fixedly forward in his throne-chair.

"What is it you want to know?" he asked impersonally.

I was very canny. "How many questions do I get?"

He reflected. "One. Or, at most, one and a half."

"Shall I kill Rafe Doerck, or will he kill me, or will we both die together?"

Riding Bible with the ring in his nose stroked his corrugated off horn, following the ridgy involutions of the corkscrew with profound care and deliberation.

"You will not die for many a year yet," he said at length. "No. Then, it seems, you will die among a considerable number of people. A crowd. Not by yourself. That much I can guarantee, anyway."

"But Doerck, Doerck?" I demanded. "What about Doerck?"

As he continued to stroke his horn, frowning and meditative and judicial, the point of his cleft hoof abruptly cut into it, and green water spouted out in a great curving stream. That instant cornucopia-surge of water!

"Now, there!" he exclaimed sharply. "See what you've gone and made me do."

The water, I repeat, welled up in a prodigious gush; a geyser; spreading like lava from a volcano, only green and restless and beautiful. In a moment it had become the absolute sea. Riding Bible and the high granite rock were lost from view. But still the flood poured and swept and churned, a universe of tossing green water.

What had Riding Bible promised me? Liar, portentous rogue! *This* was my ultimate day!

At the beginning, I had scrambled from my knees and tried to fly. No shadow of use in that. The water eddied, foamed, over me. By now I was blindly struggling in the yeasty crest of it. One struggled. Nature exacted the mockery of struggle. Yet it was without any real hope of saving oneself. Something—some terrible inscrutable dark power—clamped me, sucked me down and down. Below the spummy crest, be-

low the restless surface heave of wave — how I sank! Down, down, down — like a stone, with all the atrocious greased dispatch of a leadsman's plummet! Full fathom five — twenty fathoms — a thousand! Down!


Should I rise again? After this? Never!

No, I should never be able to rise again now. It was too late, I was too deep under.

And then, suddenly, I saw my old ribald Norman family ring flashing down through the somber water beside me. It twisted and whirled, tantalizingly close. I reached out for it. Only, before I could clutch it in my hands, it had become Eloise. She also — she, my exalted darling, her pale face pressed tight against mine, her sweet girlish arms about my neck — she also was sinking with me, voluntarily, into the farthest abyss of the incomprehensible scheme of things. Beautiful, terrible! Love — tragedy! Christ pity us! . . .

When finally I managed to get my eyes torn open, I was sitting straight up in bed, the salt bloody taste of death still in my mouth. Of course I knew this sense of drowning was no more than a reminiscence of my recent adventure in the river. But how marvelously awful, when translated into the terms of a dream! Actuality was tame beside it.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass, as I struck a match; and my face was ashen. Also my head reeled, as it had done after Doerck's jolt; and my body was chill and dripping with sweat. Flinging on my clothes, I rushed downstairs to where I could make sure of the wholesome commonplace shapes of men idling about in the hotel lobby. Noting the entrance to the bar, I



ducked in there and had a stiff brandy-and-soda.

Well! No more did my bed see me this night. I went out into the air, and walked the streets till dawn; tramping to Audubon Park and back; and heaven knows where besides! Miles and miles it must have been, in all. And every time I passed a dozing café or saloon, I would branch off for another drink. Not that the alcohol fuddled me, in the slightest.

Yet you will be very apt to think so, I suspect, when I say that, before at last reëntering my hotel with the broad sun of morning, I had decided to leave town this same day for Montana.

The ground of my decision, however, was at bottom extremely simple. My famous ring — Eloise's badge of the mother — our holy ceremonial ring! The daft dream had thrown it acutely forward in my mind. We must have our crucial ring back! For the moment, Rafe Doerck had wormed safe away. I believed with all my soul I should come on him again presently. Truly, if I did not, I should never do anything else in the world but look for him. That was signed and sealed.

Wait, though. Please do credit me with one ray of decency in this lurid welter of the expiation business. I don't mean to be nauseously heroic about it. I didn't mean to be so then. There wasn't, I am positive, the least particle of melodramatic cockiness in my resolve to kill the boy. How *could* there be? — a mere kid like that! No, self-preservation. I cannot pretend to claim my impulse ever ranked a hair above the bald instinct of self-preservation.


The plain matter of fact was that living on the same planet with young Rafe Doerck just hurt too much.

It amounted to a personal discomfort more irritating and insistent than any other personal discomfort I could possibly set over against it — not excepting the personal discomfort of getting myself killed! I did only what an irrevocable inner urgency drove toward, dictated. “Wife of two men!” rang always in my arid brain. . . .

Until he should be forever out of the way, in short, Rafe Doerck was my career. As I had quite soberly expounded to Catalina Cruz, I would spend every cent of my own, my family’s and my wife’s money to hunt the fellow down. When I had done that, it should be he or I — quietly if fate so willed, but with cannon, if need be — no more nor less than complete settlement, elimination — he or I — one or other of us, or both. I could see Catalina rather liked the notion. It appealed to her primitive delight in movement, energy.

But now. My case was entrusted into the able hands of Jean Kennedy. He and his agents — I could depend upon them tirelessly to go on seeking. Meanwhile, through my dream, this tremendous vivid new impression of Montana had got hold of me. Our wedding-ring, our halcyon wedding-ring! We *must* have that back.

If only I could be out in the mountains for a few days before the snow was altogether gone, I could find it — the hellish cave — I *knew* I could, indubitably! Animals must use such a cave. Their tracks would lead me to it. And Scaramouch would help. I should not require above a couple of weeks. . . . And now that Eloise and Miss Lakeland would no longer be here — for me to stick about — inactive, desperately unhappy! . . .



So — Montana. Yes, now that the location of a cave was proved, within three or four hours of our gulch park — Scaramouch and I — infallibly we should find it. And then — the precious fetich ring! It must come to light in an intense and systematic search. It *must*! We should have candles; torches; a perfectly free foot for the combing.

Ay, already I felt soundly assured of redeeming that ring, which, in the course of a few feverish hours, had somehow projected itself into my imagination as the touchstone and emblem of our divine passionate summer. Hideous defilements would die with the regaining of it. Glamour might return. The idea obsessed me. . . .

After my girl's Havana boat had pulled out into the stream, I closeted myself with Jean Kennedy in the dingy Magazine Street office. That was for a protracted strict survey of our affair, past and future. Then, in the evening, I took one of the good trains north. Adios, New Orleans!

Almost as I was boarding my car, I determined to travel via Pittsburgh. The task of the past two weeks, the daily task of lying to my home people — gad, that had grown of late intolerably onerous. They, who loved me — they could of a certainty stand my disclosures: they deserved the confidence. It was no time, I realized, for distractions along the road. But I would just stop off overnight at the old mansard house on Penn Avenue, and unburden myself of the whole hateful story. The mere anticipation of the relief brightened me.


However, it is not necessary to go much into this. We did foregather, and have a typical big Hainlen

night-long conference. Fortunately, none offered any objection to my immediate hiking back west again, on the trail of the ring. My stock could understand that sort of impulse. We were all strong for family, and for family rites and charms and memories. So, next morning, I once more set myself toward the far mysterious castled mountains.

This fourth of those weary transcontinental pilgrimages in less than a year! A drummer for hardware or whiskey could scarcely have done better. The current trip, though, was to be tackled thoroughly in secret. That is to say, I meant to keep the fact of my present sentimental excursion into Montana rigorously under cover. Nobody on the ground but Scaramouch and Glendenning should know of it.

In the wretched nature of events, the news of our catastrophe of the September gulch had become pretty well public property all over the territory. How widely the word of Eloise's restoration in the south had also spread, up here, I could not yet tell. I was in Piegan Springs, it may be recalled, when Miss Lakeland's wire had reached me, the thunderclap wire of announcement. No question, Glendenning and Scaramouch would try to be discreet. But in a frank and vigorous frontier society like this — what could one expect? Such an episode must cry aloud for ventilation, for the fierce virile debate of camp and saloon. Ugh! Perdition!

You may guess I would not care to canvass our intimate wounds with every Tom, Dick and Harry I should have to meet by the way. That was clearly impossible. No, I must just somehow make shift to dodge back into the mountains dead on the quiet (even resorting to dis-



guise, at the worst), recover our ring and dodge hastily out again. By then, in all human probability, Jean Kennedy would have picked up a New Orleans clew for me.

It was extremely lucky for my purpose that Eloise and Miss Lakeland should also be traveling during these same couple of weeks. They would not think to hear from me; not regularly, at any rate. The rest I should have to chance.

Once off the train at Billings, then, I proceeded to play my hand most cautiously. Changing my look from the normal as much as I reasonably could, without actual use of goggles and a false beard, I went to a liveryman where I should not be known, and hired a buggy and team. It wasn't a very magnificent buggy and team — this; and by dint of doing a lot of tall explaining (I passed for a Mr. Robert H. Johnson, a Chicago wool buyer, with highly indefinite plans); and, in especial, by dint of posting an extravagant cash forfeit, I got the rig on my own, as it were; driverless. I insisted to the liveryman that I was a crack amateur horse fancier, and always liked to drive myself. Miserable lies, subterfuges — how I abominated them!

However, having thus succeeded by stealth in organizing a modest equipment for the winter road, I embarked to the north on the next long and lonely stage of my journey, timing myself to arrive in Piegan Springs late at night. I was satisfied nobody had recognized me in Billings. And as for the subsequent sneaking into Piegan — that would be easy. The middle of a boisterous Montana March night gave fair enough excuse for muffling up, and I believe I worked the vein to its practicable limit. Not my lynx-eyed

mother herself would have had a suspicion of me, in this mass of wrappings. I thought grimly, à propos, of Catalina Cruz and the enigmatic be-scarfed Latin women of New Orleans. Yes, palpably, I had learned a trick from the demure and shady Catalina! . . .

Eventually, then — the faint scattered kerosene lights of the Springs. I put my horses up in Glendenning's stable, behind the hotel; and, on some husky-voiced pretext, sent the hostler indoors for our old friend, the proprietor. He came quickly stamping out from the bar — Glendenning; spare and prompt and active, as ever. I drew him aside under the dark coping of a wagon-shed.

"Hainlen!" I laughed; and, abrupt and hearty, took him by the knotted hand. I could hear his tongue clucking (and could imagine the flapping of the bushy white eyebrows) in his stark surprise. Speaking in a rapid natural tone, I briefly told him what I wanted. "In — in you go!" he said; and smuggled me, still muffled to the ears, through the halls into his own downstairs bedroom. Then he rustled out and got Scaramouch. With that, and with something to eat and drink on the table before us, we straightway — the assorted queer trio of us, Eloise's self-constituted committee of Montana guardians — straightway we three, who had not, in effect, been able to save her from her tragedy, fell into an absorbed and exhaustive powwow. The gulch! Vagrant and motley, we three musketeers of the gulch. . . .

Less than a month ago, you will perhaps recollect, in this same hotel, I had been doing what trifle I could toward the nursing of poor Scaramouch, who lay weak and apathetic on his broad back, after the shot through

his lung. We could do nothing, though, to cheer him. The hero and idol of the town saloons, he lay and glumly brooded.

But the simple news of Eloise's return to life — Jove, the instant wonders that had wrought in him. What! A rescue? Hey! His "little girl"—his "little girl" was found! Lifting bolt upright in bed, he stared, the pale bluish-green eyes flickering with rapt excitement, while I read my curt wire aloud. Found! His "little girl"! O Jesus! . . .

Not, understand, that I would be overmuch engaged in watching Scaramouch at such a moment. Rather — not! I had my own tolerably imperious devices to think about just then (as, the devil knew, I still had now!). Within an hour of the receipt of the telegram, I was driving furiously cross-country to catch the daily eastbound on the N. P. Once, in the stretched interval since, I had written a single blank line from New Orleans, divulging nothing really beyond the bare fact. Yes, Eloise was indeed alive and in the best of care. It amounted to only a hollow verification of the Berwick wire.

That, however, had been sufficient for the undemanding Swede boy. Forthwith he had quitted his bed, begun to walk about. To-night he came puffily lurching and stumbling into Glendenning's half-office bachelor room, his naïve blond mug aflame with expectancy, pleasure. Yah! Matt! He crunched my hand. By jiminy! Well, well! He had to flop heavily down into a chair.

Unarguably he was not his old bull-like self (nor ever would be so again). But, you may take the testimony of my numbed hand for it, he yet lacked several

ample shades of being done. Far from that. When I mentioned the cave and my plan, he was on his feet before the words had more than escaped my lips. Would he go? Sure, sure, he'd go! What the thunder! Hey! He wasn't sick, was he? *Sure*, he'd go! Yah! Did I think him a dam' tinhorn?

Whether he reckoned the search for our defiled ring worth this much blooming trouble or not, he was anyway so unfeignedly glad to see me and to hear all about Eloise — it didn't matter. If I had suggested his tagging along with me to Tierra del Fuego, or to the moon, he would have chimed in with the madness, on the dot. That was his stripe. He couldn't help himself. You checked off his reactions in advance. His faith just worked to such and such a tune. . . . Bully squat lump of honor and heart's devotedness! . . .

But — harum-scarum or no, the cave job ahead, Glendenning took our arrangements brisk in charge; and an hour before daylight of that same March morning, Scaramouch and I were comfortably jogging out of town, on the thin wheel-ruts toward the viewless mountains.

Once more, then, I was bestriding my sagacious old white Crow, in my old romantic cowboy saddle; once more carrying the gulch Winchester I had bought the inordinate sleepy day in Rainbow, and my choice of the pair of .44 gulch six-shooters. May! What memories! Scaramouch, riding a sturdy brown pony of Glendenning's, and leading another, packed with our traps, also carried the gulch double-barrel ten-gauge, and the second of the Colt's. Ruling out Eloise's .22 target rifle, it totted up exactly to our last summer's armament; for, in the snug harness holster under my

arm, I still wore the able little Smith and Wesson. Moreover, we had an extra item, not down on the original list. It was inconspicuous, but I liked to reflect on it. I mean Catalina's neat stiletto, which now always reposed in its sheath in my lower coat pocket. So much for equipment.

Necessarily, for my plan, we had still to beat the dawn. As we pointed away out of town in the thick dark of the March morning, a curious strong wind was blowing; a dry west wind, half a gale. Scaramouch told me—"A chinook." It would be overstating to describe this steady rush of air as warm, yet it had a peculiarly unwintery quality; and my companion said the snow would literally fade and vanish under it, without seeming to melt. Soon I could discern the process myself.

We did not loiter on the road any, believe. Riding one before the pack-horse and the other behind, and skirting the involved feet of the mountains, we edged consistently along; and by noon, or a scrap or so over, had landed secure in the gulch; quite, I think, without being sighted. From the mouth of the gulch up, nearing the park, we were mighty particular about our tracks. The snow this year was going as early as it had come; and lay now, for the most part, only in large gray broken patches. These we tried to avoid, very scrupulously.

Park! . . . O heaven! The thrill that tiny elfin circle of mountain meadow could stir in my soul! And the torture! Bleak leaden March was not our month of May. The dark surrounding cones of the evergreens, smooth and conventionalized and tight, seemed almost funereal, against the livid snow. Yet—how


the sense of our lovely May continued to hang over it all, even in the teeth of the brawling chinook. Enchanted woodsy shrine! . . . But I must not dwell on these youthful things. There was sober work to do.

The unresting night and the sustained hitch of exercise had tired poor Scaramouch to the bone. Now, though, we could ease the tension. I unloaded the pack-horse; and then hobbled our three ponies out together on the good feeding ground down by my former herder's cabin. When I had returned to the park, we finished off Glendenning's generous prepared lunch, between us; and I made Scaramouch crawl into his blankets for a bit.

"You catch a snooze," I said. "I'm going to take my rifle and stroll back to the gulch. I may rout out a deer."

He protested bitterly; but I overbore him; and, in spite of himself, before I could get started, he was sound asleep. I hooked a couple of candles out of the pack into my pocket. Ostensibly, yes — I was going to hunt a deer. In reality, I just could not put off the overwhelming itch to make an instant try for the cave.

So, candles and rifle and six-shooters and knife, up the familiar narrow winding gut I launched. Past our idyllic marriage-place by the pool (never mind that now), and on, over the ridge at the head of the gulch, down into the valley beyond. I was cutting a pace, but endeavoring to use my pilgrim eyes, too. Scarcely had I dropped into the next valley when I ran plump over the fresh tracks of a man! Unmistakable plain footprints — made this same day! *Day?* Made since eleven o'clock!



Who the deuce could it be? Hello! I did not like the idea at all. I had artlessly been counting, as an inevitable matter of course (fool that I was!), on having this entire range of mountains to myself. Absolutely. And now — an intruder on my sacred preserve — the first shot out of the box!

Dash! Well, I should have to see who the fellow was. His tracks led unhesitatingly on back into the mountains, further and further on back, precisely as I wanted to go myself. I followed, traveling the best I knew — it must have been above a couple of hours. The afternoon began to turn. From the sharp freshness of the tracks, my man was directly in front. I sped up, dipped, climbed ridge upon ridge. It was poignantly like the dreadful weeks of search for Eloise, only then there had been no hint to tie to, no tracks.

At length I descended the side of a certain steep rocky gully. Suddenly, across the cleft from me, I heard the heavy crash of a falling stone. I stood still; frozen; peering. Then I saw him, clearly outlined against a ragged splotch of snow, stooping above the edge of a strait cliffy fissure.

Ah, I saw him — my man. God! It was Doerck!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOURTH

THE ULTIMATE LAW

I did not stop to ask how or when or why. Something — no doubt the startled hypnotic intensity of my gaze — must have pulled his own eyes round. Alert as a lynx he was. He whirled, spied me, fell flat on his face and wriggled away behind a convenient spur of rock; all, as it were, in the one movement. On my side, be sure, I did the same. In that first gasping flash of mutual recognition, we neither of us had attempted to shoot.

Doerck! Safe behind the barricade of my rock, I caught a long breath. *He* — in Montana! O my prophetic warrior soul! Doerck! . . .

But, actually — the mystery of it! And the fantasy! Both of us pat here, where neither could, by the wildest stretch of imagination, have been expected to be! I tried dazedly to account for myself. Consider. My prayer in the New Orleans cathedral, that crazy and indecipherable dream, our ring. Rank unreason, all. Yet, all just swiftly leading up to this — shrewd, subtle, practical, inexorable. Guiding and leading — hunter and hunted — up to this blind sudden encounter across a little span of mountain gully! . . .

If I had prayed in cathedrals for a thousand years, I could not conceivably have demanded of high heaven

a thing more fashioned to my hand. How could I? Here we two were, alone in the world together, perfectly cut off. No matter what bolt of destiny should befall us — one or other or both — grant any ending in the cards, the marks of it would forever be buried, right on the spot. Ending. Ay, settlement! And without filthy publicity, scandal. I was armed like a brigand, as unquestionably the boy must be, also. I glanced up at the sky. There remained at least two good hours of shooting light left.

Naked fang to fang, claw to claw, elemental cunning to cunning. So — here we two were, fittingly met at last; the pair of irreconcilable “husbands”; matched in the way that colliding men are always at bottom matched, locked to the death. If he could succeed in erasing me, his immediate and incidental troubles in life would be over. If I could not succeed in erasing him! . . . But an immense confidence, exuberant and brazen, surged up in me. I felt an unholy, a quite ridiculous, certainty of myself.

To begin with, the big boulder I had instinctively dived behind. It was a mass of granite, huge and shapeless and detached; fully adequate for all the protection service I asked of it. In addition to that, though, it possessed a point — my gray boulder — oh, another point of blessed and incalculable vantage! Luck, truly, was with me. For on the up-gully side, this sprawling stone bastion of mine butted out into a dense growth of scrub evergreen; a thicket of cedar, juniper, or some such. Oh, bully! Beyond again, and interlinking with the scrub, extended a wide area of larger but more thinly-spaced trees. Taken as a whole — rock, undergrowth, timber — it made a reach of ad-


mirable cover. Bully! I responded exultantly to the beck of it.

Rafe's lean spur of dornick across the glen, on the contrary, stood out absolutely bare and isolated. He could not shift two yards, up or down, without exposing himself. What ho! Mind your step, O you gambler, you careless and squinting young despoiler of women! Mind your step, dog! I hugged the rifle which had once before turned a spreadeagle savage trick for me. My arteries pounded, my heart glowed with a delicious pagan warmth.

Inch by inch, then, keeping my eyes always painfully glued to Doerck's meager bulwark, and my Winchester cocked and at the ready, I squirmed along out from behind my boulder, into the greenery, the more plastic shelter, of the scrub. I loved that hoary boulder. I loved each little bush and tree. Blitheness sang in my brain. For a bit, indeed, the violent and excited throbbing of my blood all but incapacitated me. "Kill, kill!" the pulsing within seemed to cry. "Everybody pays sometime!" "Your hour, Rafe Doerck — your hour, your hour, your hour!"

I had to clench my teeth strong. Over us, the great clean windy silence of the mountains brooded; impartial, impenetrable, aloof. It would enfold equally whoever won, whoever lost. A fair field, no favor. You with the angel's name, accursed — your hour! . . .

At length I had snailed along to the extreme upper edge of my thicket of cedars, hoping that from there I might be able to get a kind of rake behind Doerck's rock-breast. But he was himself no fool at this ancient Indian game. He had foreseen such a possibility, and discounted it. I lay still and thought.



One of these smaller trees, now. The bushiest. Should I risk trying to hoist myself up into one of them? It would be finicking work, desperate, dangerous. The tree couldn't fail to shake (a baby tree), under my weight, my unaccustomed scrambling motion. And, if once it shook — all off — Doerck would infallibly pot me out of it — smack — with ease! . . . No, climbing a tree would never do. Not yet, anyway — not in this broad light.

Abruptly, in his incessant skirmishing back and forth behind his rock, in the strain of his effort to keep track of me, the boy inadvertently stuck out a foot. The foot is hardly a very noble part of the anatomy. Humans don't ordinarily aim at it. Nevertheless, a mere thrust in the foot, I remembered — in the heel — had been sufficient to swing the downfall of so prodigious a hero as the demi-god Achilles. What! If of the demi-god Achilles, why, then, not of the demi-devil Rafe Doerck? . . .

I drew a quick close bead, holding on the instep (rather than the heel), and fired. Gad, the riot of shrieking reverberations called out by the crack of that .44 Winchester! I did not hear any sound from Doerck himself, but the foot was lightning-like jerked in. So ho, my bucko! Something seemed to dally with you, eh? Ouch, a hit! In the single shot!

No mistake — I had nicked him, smart enough. Let come what would now, he was scarcely apt to attempt to break away. More or less — righto — I had him nailed fast to the rock. All steady, ravager Rafe! That was not so bad. It would do, for a beginning. The winged foot, the winged foot! . . . I chuckled at my pretty double *entendre*.

After this, the breathless minutes ticked on empty again. Not the shadow of the hint of a word passed between us. I suppose we both realized the grapple was too final, too fundamental, for the tameness of words. Unwinkingly he maintained his narrow defense, I maneuvered my broader and rangier attack, in deadly quiet. Grimness and stealth! Never, before or since, have I been so unrelieved a creature of primal sense, so naked and unadulterated a hunting animal. . . . But — the minutes were ticking on.

Then a brilliant Odyssean conceit popped into my brain. Climb a tree? Not at all. Just pretend — why not simply *pretend* — to climb one? Nice! Lodge a dummy in the branches, make the tree sway from the ground! Perhaps thus I could dupe the boy into opening himself up — for a clear shot. Bravo! At any rate, it was a thought. It would be worth a trial.

So off I stripped my overcoat, and proceeded to plump it out with brush, aromatic cedar twigs and boughs. When I had buttoned this impromptu green filling securely into it, and had jammed my hat atop, the general effect might remotely have suggested a man. Selecting my tree, thereupon (and all without the waste of an unnecessary second, you may well believe), I softly, softly, drove the scarecrow up into the thickest of those tough tight branches, being extraordinarily careful the while to nurse my own skin.

Beforehand, too, I should say, I had braced my rifle under an adjoining tree, cocked and leveled at the exact spot where Doerck ought to appear, if he wanted to get a really capital slant at the faked gentleman aloft. . . . Born crook that he was! Would he guess, see

through me? He lived in a perpetual atmosphere of such stunts.

Bite, you carrion, bite! . . . Gently, gently. . . . When I had propelled the stuffed overcoat a little distance up into the tree, and had pinned it there, I dropped back low on the ground, facing across the glen, my rifle resting snug at my shoulder, my body so disposed that I could kick and manipulate the "planted" tree at will with my feet. Then, all set for shooting, I started in. The tree behind me shook, not too much, in small paroxysms, realistically.

Rafe detected the first movement, on the dot, as I was satisfied he would. And — biting, biting — by my soul, yes — he *bit*! Out whipped the barrel of his rifle, at the upper edge of the stone. Then his dark head showed a trifle over the rim. O devious monster, scotched, sprung in your own dirty guerilla trap! . . .

I think I have mentioned before that the slight cast in his right eye caused him always to shoot from the left side. This made the immediate case only the more convenient for him, however; my scrub thicket being lined off to the right of the boulder.

So, in the jockeying about now for a rapid sight on my scarecrow, he uncovered but the barest, sparest fraction of the corner of a tousled black topknot. A shaving! Hot I slammed for that, all the same, chancing the thinness of the margin. And — Gehenna! Again I had done it — scored — another fancy hit! A second Deadwood Dick come to judgment!

Rafe's own gun never spoke. Down he ducked, how much hurt I could not tell.


Well, there, poor care-free boy — this was rather like flicking the lash over him, eh? Two touches —

in two times up — head and foot! The head wound couldn't be very serious, though; a graze, probably. Still, I had managed to burn him twice, without letting him pump even a single shot back at me. Decidedly, it was my afternoon on. My gross confidence in the issue had not to the present belied me. So far — prime — so much!

I must have been busy retrieving my hat and overcoat from the stiff branches of the tree (that raw tang of March weather helped one remember such details) when the next baffling change was rung in the complexion of affairs. Bam, of a sudden, on the lower side, Doerck plunged stark out from behind his spur of rock; crouched; looking straight before him; making a headlong dash of it for the bottom of the ravine. Open, he ran; reckless, defiant; scorning me utterly! Strategy chucked neck-and-crop to the winds!

Mighty discreetly, the tail of an eye always on his stone barricade, I had been prying and prodding up into the tree with my Winchester. For that sybaritic overcoat. Now, in a fever, I tumbled frantically to the lower edge of my own boulder, and cut loose at him, firing like a madman, slug after slug after slug, completely emptying the magazine. . . .

Awful shooting it was — rotten! Words can't describe how amateur and rum. He went down to hands and knees once; but doggedly crippled up again, not trying to answer my fusillade, using his rifle only as a crutch, hobbling sullenly on. My nerves twitched under the ordeal with impotent eagerness, spoiling any modicum of aim I might have had. A glaring mark like that — less than a hundred yards! I spattered clods and splinters all about him. When I had flung away



the last cartridge out of my Winchester, I took to the Colt's. Five more hysterical spitting blazes! . . .

In spite of everything I could bring to bear, he was able to lurch round a tall shoulder of rock on the floor of the gully, and disappear. Heaven and earth! I had let him slip through my fingers, then — damnation — after all, after all!

Chagrined, humiliated, I could have wept. My flash avenger's bravado, my silly flapdoodle hopes! . . . Yet — it was impossible he should actually escape me. Why, I had crimped him three separate times. *At least* three! Hardy and resolute he was — who questioned it? — of course! But surely — surely I had only to follow up my campaign.

Reloading rifle and six-shooter, and pulling on my coat, I lost not a whipstitch. Where Doerck had got to, after vanishing behind the big fortress wedge of rock — that I had no means of knowing. It would never do, though, to trust to providence. I couldn't afford to venture out into the clear steeps below my bowlder.

Back through the cedar scrub I crawled, therefore; and up into the stretch of larger trees beyond; embarking on a cautious wide détour. I saw nothing, heard nothing, that interfered a hair's-breadth with my progress. Dodging, scuttling rabbit-wise from tree to tree, from ragged rock to rock, I worked swiftly along toward the head of the gully; till I had reached a place where I figured I could reasonably cross over to the opposite slope.

This I did; and then began to edge back down again, on Doerck's side, only higher up on the ravine-wall than he had been. The gray afternoon light (there

had been no sun all day) abruptly dimmed, it seemed to me. I consulted the sky anxiously. Was night going to fall before I could push the atrocious business through? I had an acute fear, and unhooked another notch of speed.

Arrived down to where I could command the ground over which the boy had made his dash, I found myself still at fault. Back and forth I hitched, ever watchfully, nearer and nearer to the bottom-land. The lower levels of the gully were so broken as to make the task beastly troublesome. But I kept obstinately to it and to it — my reconnoissance — till I seemed to have exhausted just about everything. What the deuce could have become of the fellow? He had been too shot-up to travel far.

Then, a lucky glimpse — and I knew the whole story! The secret loomed out like a snowy peak in the evening mountains. *This was the region of his cave — the hellish reptilian sink of a cave!* It was here; and he had contrived to win cold into it. . . .

A sweet mess — a sweet mess, that! Ay, he was going to organize his final stand in the appropriate inky slime of his cave! . . .

I had to flop prone on the ground for a moment, and get hold of myself — that discovery of the cave did such a train of things to me. Abominable! . . . But after a bit of a whirl of teeth-gnashing and palpitations, I gradually toned down, adjusted myself to the idea. Creeping in close, I made absolutely dead certain.

Not that the mouth of the cave was a simple black hole in the perpendicular face of a cliff, understand. It wasn't. Great fragments of sandstone lay strewn all about, veiling the entrance, clogging the way to it.

These rent boulders constituted, in effect, a kind of involved half-portico to the inner lair; a piece of confused and overgrown preliminary tunnel. One couldn't really see the exact opening into the mountain-wall.

I say I knew positively that Doerck was in the cave; and I did. For there happened to be banked up right here the remnant of what must have been earlier a huge drift of snow. Any number of animal tracks still crossed and recrossed this sunken patch of grayish-white muck (none of them bigger than a timber wolf's, I think); and, on top of all, the recent footprints of a man. The man had passed over the route more than once. His latest trip, however, you would not be apt to mistake. Blood — fresh ruddy stains of blood — picked it out.

So! I had him corralled, then. And he had been in there before I arrived. Depositing what traps he carried, probably; and routing out possible animal neighbors. (All this to myself, in a luminous twinkling.) Evidently he had not encountered anything very startling, either; no hibernating grizzly, or customer of that surly stripe. A timber wolf would never put up a battle for possession. Corralled! But — how to steer myself into the perdition-black corral with him? . . .

Well, our arena, then. This was the problem I had to solve. The cave, I took it, would be too large and too lofty for any smoking-out process. Also it would likely have vents here and there in the roof or walls. Perhaps, even, these might be of a size to let a man's body squeeze through. Doerck, however, I suspected, was scarcely in trim for much of a chase over the mountains. No, he ought to be mighty good and glad to


avail himself of the stay offered by the cave. I squirmed directly up alongside the opening into the vile underground chamber, and listened with all my ears. Was that a faint whistling groan I heard? I could not swear.

Speedily my late discouragement evaporated. I should simply have to wait now till pitch dark — that was all. Then I could crawl inside. If Doerck attempted to build a fire, so much the worse for him, the better for me. But he had not tried this yet. At least I could smell no smoke.

As I crouched silently there by the side of that defiled hole in the mountain-wall, I wondered ceaselessly and helplessly what had indeed brought the renegade back. . . . As if this would ever get me anywhere, in the pinch! Bah!

A few minutes ago I had been praying fervently for the thick windy night of the gulch-bottom to hold off. Now I prayed with a quite equal sincerity for it to settle down — fast. As I need hardly report, it came at its own unmoved pace; and I waited, torn by weariness, by the desire of sleep (of which I had got virtually none the night before); by a million alternating, somersaulting hopes and fears. I wanted intensely to scout up and have a look at what Doerck was doing by that rock crevice when I had surprised him. But I did not dare to quit the mouth of the cave. Fixedly watching, listening, there I lurked and prowled; till at last the laggard darkness did seem to have grown nearly solid all round about me.

Then, screwing myself up like a spring, and drawing one long breath, I flattened out on the greasy snow, and headed in through the tortuous rocky channel that



led to the real opening of the cave. Taut does not describe it.

Soon I was off the snow, and on a rippled dry surface that reeked of mold; mingled earth and stone. Pushing my rifle noiselessly in front of me, and writhing painfully along after it, inch by inch, bent digging fingers hooked into whatever chinks of leverage I could find, I kept close-jammed against the right wall of the passage. If Doerck heard me, he could shoot at the sound. It was a cinched bet he couldn't *see* me!

Meantime, my own ears told me more and more significantly of him. The low moaning I had heard outside increased in volume with every foot of my advance. It came at precisely regular intervals — this half-grunt, half-whistle, of pain; rhythmic as a metronome; as if it were an integral part of the heavy exhalations of the groaner's breath. Was he completely unconscious?

I wormed on without interruption. Shortly I was beyond question in the high-vaulted arch of the cave proper. The lifeless air, the stale acrid smells, betokened that. Straight for the groans I crawled. Abruptly my rifle-barrel touched something — a yard or so out in front of me — something yielding. I stopped, my veins running ice. . . But no — it had not disturbed him.

Jove, he *must* be unconscious! I scrambled up and felt with my hand. That was his leg. Not a sign of response. I went carefully over him, from tip to toe, without hurry, searching for weapons. A knife and a revolver I took, as well as his Winchester, which lay on the floor of the cave beside him. Then I stood on my feet.

The next step was to cache these superfluous arms away out of reach, somewhere. Still paddedly, but with an infinite easing about the heart nevertheless, I piled the captured plunder, with my own rifle, behind a remote angle of wall.

Then, six-shooter in hand, I returned to Doerck; hauled a Piegan candle from my pocket; and, the muzzle of the Colt's flush at his ribs for form's sake, proceeded to strike a match. Briskly the candle-wick ignited, in that sheltered air; the tallow warmed; the tiny yellowish flame towered up, pitting itself dauntlessly against a cordon of frightful and grotesque shadows. . . . *Shadows*, my God!

But Doerck! I stared at him. His eyes were shut, his skin (where it remained unsullied by blood) had gone white as milk. A dry brown clot of gore, though, caked most of his brow and hair and beard. With his breath each moment came the stertorous groan. On his neck and left shoulder there was another big crusted smear of blood; and, again, on the left foot and ankle. I shook him tentatively. Insensible as a log! . . . Faugh! All my raft of superior precautions had been purely wasted. I could have walked in here two hours ago!

Releasing my gaze from him, I peered shudderingly about the cave. I did not then, to be sure, know the details of Eloise's dreadful experience in this place as I was afterwards to know them. But — Christ help me — how I could suspect it all, with a vividness that twisted at my stomach and made my head spin! Chamber of horrors. . . . Poor unutterably tormented child! And, child though she was, yet mother of another child to be — a son — my little murdered, worse than murdered, son! . . .

I espied a ledge nearby where a candle had been set before, and put mine there now. Then, cocked six-shooter in hand, I continued to stand stupidly over Doerck. Once or twice or thrice I held the revolver on the creased knot of pain between his closed eyes, and sighted intently down the barrel, my finger slightly pressing the trigger. Some incomprehensible thing, however — I can't explain — something always prevented me from giving the final drastic tug. I wanted to. There was no remotest spark of compassion in me. Execution, butchery — bah, be damned to words! . . . But I couldn't do it.

After a hushed and straining go of this kind of bitter shilly-shally, I strode decisively to the mouth of the cave; stooped; passed out and scraped up a hatful of snow. Bringing that back in with me, I took a wad of the gray slush and clapped it down on Doerck's matted brow. His eyelids just perceptibly fluttered at the cold contact. Then, as the snow gradually melted, he sighed and stirred.

"Water!" he muttered, in a hoarse throaty voice.

Lump by lump I dropped the snow into his discolored mouth. He swallowed convulsively; and at length, with an effort, opened his eyes and looked fixedly up at me.

"Well, how goes it!" I said cheerfully.

Though conscious, he had not yet by any means regained his memory; the harsh memory of recent events. He lay quiescent, unfussing; mutely probing into my cynical good-humor. Then—"What's the matter with me?" he asked.

"Matter? You're a trifle clawed up. Shy on

blood, mostly, I guess. Still, it's not so bad but you mightn't nose through, if you had a chance."

Ah! Chance? My triumphant voice! . . . In livid flashes now he was recovering all the various steps of the adventure; getting his perspective back. Instinctively, without the loss of a second, he reached out his usable right hand and began to grope about over the ground for his Winchester; and, when he had no luck there, over his person for the revolver; his squinting unafraid eyes fastened gimlet-like on me the while. Poise? It was superb!

I burst out laughing. "All off, bucko! Stripped, eh? Gone!"

He abandoned the search, understanding. I could see his ready crook's brain intrepidly settle to work, feeling about this way and that, exactly in the fashion of the groping hand. But—it was a tight corner. After a small pause, he tried to sit up.

"Let me help you," I suggested.

I hated like the very devil to touch him. Still, I did; dragging him back to where he could rest his hulking shoulders against a slope of rock-wall. . . . Was it the precise spot where Eloise had once on a time leant, tied and swooning? It might easily enough have been. I hoped so.

The boy now no longer groaned automatically with each breath. It was sheer gameness in him, though, that he did not. I could plainly make out what the exertion of moving cost him. It racked him to the inmost soul.

How thoroughly he had by this grasped the situation,

his next words showed. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Do?" I pondered the point, or pretended to. "Well, I had rather thought of hanging. Or burning at the stake, maybe." With a large gesture I waved the question away. "But never mind that now. We've got plenty of room for that — all night. That can wait till to-morrow. Ericson — you remember droll Ericson, our lopsided Swede cook, eh? — old Ericson'll probably be tracking along bright and early to-morrow morning. And you can bet you he'll want to have a finger in this pie. Yes, that's about it — Ericson. We'll just let everything slide till he comes."

Those wicked black snake eyes, with their cross, disconcerting and faint — steadfastly they regarded me. But he did not attempt again to speak.

"By the bye," I went on. "There ought to be a ring — a wedding-ring — back in here somewhere. Unless you ever collected it yourself."

He gave no sign of having heard.

"So with your leave," I said, "I think I'll take a little nuzzle round. Queer about a mislaid gimcrack of a ring like that, isn't it? For that's what brought me all the way out here, you know."

I happened to glance laterally down, and perceived a scant roll of pack at the edge of the circle of candle-irradiation on the dabbled floor. Falling upon it — the roll — I slashed it sharp open; but it contained only a blanket and a couple of days' stock of grub; so I merely kicked it away. Then, lighting a second candle, and carrying all the firearms with me, I began systematically to cover the entire ground-plan of the cave, weaving progressively back from the entrance

into the deepest recesses of the interior. To and fro I tacked ("scouring" was the word); irregular side-wall to irregular side-wall; geometrical as a machine; concentrated, deliberate, bent; my eyes glued to the ribbed dry earthen surface underfoot. I needed that ring to complete my day.

And indeed, the rounding up of it was absurdly simple. A dozen yards beaten back past where Doerck sat, and my high-extended candle had called out the glint; a minute bland glint, among the tangled hoof-paddings of the dirt. Holy God! I pounced wildly down, seized the thin gold band in fumbling fingers. A sob of laughter shook me. Found! I straightened, stood very still. A guttering tallow candle clutched in my left hand, two slippery Winchesters clamped under the same arm, oblivious, grotesque — there in the acrid bowels of the unmentionable cave I stood, gaping at Grandmother Hainlen's famous old Norman heirloom that nested snug on my palm! . . . Found! . . .

Well, presently blowing out my prodigal number two candle, and stowing the rifles away in the wall-angle as before, I returned to Doerck; and squatted down on the ground in front of him, tossing the ring blithely up into the air and catching it; half beside myself with this showering of fortune.

Nor did I have the greatness of spirit, I am afraid, to refrain from crowing quite banally over the boy. "Yes, if you'll believe me, it was for this trinket alone I hiked all the way out here!" I said. "With no thought of the honor of meeting *you*. None in the world — naturally!" I made as if to put the ring on my finger, then suddenly desisted. "Not yet," I grinned. "Not yet, not yet." Securely I thrust

Eloise's marriage-token away into a waistcoat pocket. "I wonder what brought you out, now. Just the pleasure of revisiting old happy scenes, eh?"

After a blank scowling fixity of stare, and wetting his feverish lips with the tip of his tongue, he did actually answer. "I came out to pile some rocks up over Whiskey."

An instant glare of vision hit me. Oh, but this was too charming! Piling up rocks over Whiskey! That was what he had been doing, then, in the afternoon. A stroke or so, and I had rebuilt the whole lofty picture. Unique devotion of friends!

One fine September night two romantic shepherds abduct a woman. They fall out over the award of their prize, and the younger of the twain stabs his drunken and middle-aged compadre to death. Perhaps on the identical polluted spot of cave-floor where I was sitting now! . . . Anyway, Doerck had turned the trick; and, after pushing his ghastly murder through, had quickly shouldered the carcass, lugged it off, climbed a piece of the gully-wall with it and then canted the awkward souvenir down into a convenient rock-fissure. No skeleton was wanted at that sylvan feast! Perish the coarsely amorous! . . .

Well. So much for six months ago. I could more or less take all the significance of the earlier situation in. But this — now — to-day? The cairn-piling over the elderly pal's corpse! Was it a belated effort to hide the crime? Or just a common philistine urge to give the man Flynn a decent burial?

I puzzled. If the former — a worried effort to hide the crime — in heaven's name, why? Flesh did not decompose in this western climate. Whiskey would only

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dry out down there in the narrow stone crevice. Whatever inconsiderable morsel of him, indeed, that the tireless little scavengers of the mountain might chance to leave on his bones! . . .

Ah. I liked to think of Whiskey feeding that mill of tearing and ravenous little mountain jaws. It cheered me. It seemed to me probably the first sound and disinterested service he had done the universe since the original contaminated hour of his birth!

Wait, though. I can't be making the case — my startled welter of pros and cons — very intelligible. What I mean to say is, that, in the rarefied Montana air, odors of putrefying flesh would never attract anybody to Flynn's inglorious crypt. And — what difference if it had? With Doerck clean skipped away — into Yucatan, or where not! As a bare matter of fact, in all our endless combing of these mountains last autumn, we had none of us happened to stumble on the murdered man's body. But, I insist, it could have made essentially no difference to Doerck if we had. So why trouble himself, run risks? Especially at this late date!

The decent burial motif, then — sentiment, superstition! . . . Well, by Jove! A disillusioned young reprobate like that. And with his unmistakable physical courage, too — letting himself be hag-ridden by such a fancy!

"So!" I exclaimed. "Whiskey's lying out all winter bothered you, eh?"

He nodded. I did not cease marveling at the rank curiosity of this twist of feeling in him. But gradually, as I went on, I discovered I could rather reconcile the points. After all, he was a gambler — that type.

And, for a certain number of years at least, the priests had had him in charge. Which undoubtedly told one something. I debated the possibility of his eventual complete weakening — his putting up a whine to die a good Catholic. . . . Fat prospect *he* had of ever dying a good Catholic now!

There, though, I must admit, I was badly off the scent. Whatever singular quirk of sensitiveness the fellow may have had as to Whiskey's unprotected state before the mountain-rats and the elements (and it seemed to bulk out sufficiently strong), it did not extend in him to the reproach of churchliness. Not Doerck. He had soon filed a proper alibi as to that.

"Where were you going from here, if I may ask?" I said. "You needn't commit yourself, of course, unless you want to. Only, we've got to pass the hours together till Ericson arrives somehow, eh? So why not a little dash of innocent and improving talk?"

Twenty-one years old or thereabout — spotted with debauchery and crime as he was — spotted now, too, with gobbets of his own encrusted blood. I stared speculatively at him, genially. Again, after a pause, he wetted his cracked lips and replied.

"I was heading up north. Alaska."

The idea of that impressed me. North. While we were hunting him in the far south! . . . No, undeniably, he was not dull at all — this stalwart young person who squinted. He knew his way about.

Interrupting my sage reflections, he advanced a remark, totally unsolicited. "I sure didn't reckon you was a low-down enough skunk to torture a hombre."

"Well," I defended myself, "hanging suits me. But we haven't got any rope. You can't pull off a reason-

able Vigilante hanging without a couple of feet or so of some kind of rope, can you? ”

I eyed him, and he me. The tallow candle on the ledge burned fair and bright, without a flicker.

“I’m bled to a fare-you-well whisper now,” he muttered viciously. “Why the hell couldn’t you leave me alone till I’d cashed in? ”

“Oh, you wouldn’t have cashed in,” I assured him. “You’d have waked up of yourself, all right, in time. You’re still a pretty husky kid.”

“Shot chuck full of holes — that’s what I am!” he growled.

“Don’t let’s talk of disagreeable things,” I protested. “Ericson’ll have a plan for you when he comes, never fear. You remember what a rattler he used to be at throwing the hatchet?” I settled back. “Tell me about the happy hours you spent in this cave with my —”

For a moment my mouth refused to shape the word. “With my wife, I was going to say. But you know, she insists now on regarding herself as *your* wife. When you already have a new girl — ha, ha! Queer lot — women, eh? By the bye.” My six-shooter was loosely resting across my knees, trained on him, the butt in my left hand. Abruptly I dropped the other hand into my lower overcoat pocket. “By the bye. Speaking of girls. You’ve no recollection of ever noticing this before, I suppose?” And I produced and unsheathed Catalina Cruz’s efficient short knife, the present from Rocco Bordaglione.

Rafe peered long and hard at the stiletto, then long and hard at me. “Let’s see it, will you?” he demanded thickly.

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I returned his riveted breathless look with interest, and gleaned absolutely what he meant to do. And it contented me. Only, I shifted hands on my revolver-butt.

Quietly, then, I offered him the knife, haft forward. Quietly he reached his uncrippled right arm and hand out, and took the slender weapon from me. A small tremor passed all up and down him, but his powerful fingers closed vise-like on the ebony grip. Eyes mesmerically chained to mine, he lifted Catalina's stiletto to the level of his throat, point inward, his hand extended two feet in front.

Suddenly, a swift closing of the eyes, and he drove the blade home. Squatting Indian-fashion there in the candle-light, so near that I could touch him, I watched, watched. And, beyond cavil, he was game. Into his stretched throat he whipped the knife, deep, gashing the edge crosswise in the same fierce spasmodic gesture. Out of his handsome column of neck, strong and young and smooth, the gore literally spirted. Down he crumpled, along the wall to the side, a shapeless smear at my feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIFTH

AN ANNIVERSARY

Once arrived back in New York, I gave myself wholeheartedly up to the pursuit of my trade. First, I moved into the new office my family had got for me over the Fifth Avenue picture-shop. It was a pleasant enough little berth — that office; half studio, half draughting-room; at the front on the third floor; not so far above Madison Square. Here often came Birk Lanchard to me from Randolph, Gay and Whetford's, down Broadway; and in addition, through the protracted hours of many a soft spring night, we had a series of solemn and cigarette-burning conferences. Terrific business powwows these were, understand. Briefly they ended in my writing to Pittsburgh for my father and uncles, and in Birk's sending up-state for his mother and family lawyer. Then, finally, one grand general thrash-out, and we had entered — Birk and I — into a regular and definite partnership.

Before May Day, my note-book tells me, HAINLEN AND LANCHARD was lettered in black on the ground-glass door and windows of our modest third-story front. Absolutely soul-satisfying inscription! . . . Certainly it has remained there, as well as on a number of other doors and windows besides, ever since. That would be April, 1885. Twenty-eight — fifty-eight! . . . Yes, we were anchored, no question.

With serene confidence, Birk (boy though he was) struck right out into his immense field of the public building. Even in that maiden year of his independence as a workman, he found himself; entering into a competition for a middling pretentious western court house, and winning it. He covered the firm with credit.

As for me — I went much slower. From childhood, I think, I had been impressed by the adequate beauty and fitness of the French and Italian villas; particularly the Italian. I had seen these villas at rather close range, studied them. The notion of adapting their quality to some scheme of the luxurious American country house had long been a familiar obsession with me. Now I indulged myself in a fine liberal course of unhampered experimentation. I designed such a Latin-derived country house for my Uncle Bob, the contractor, at Sewickley. And it seemed to do.

Justly or not, there is no harm in admitting, HAINLEN AND LANCHARD has in fact flourished. I doubt if any man in this hemisphere can touch Birk at his own peculiar thing. And I, at least, have developed a kind of specialized name which goes on a good many drawings. People who crop up with a couple of hundred thousand dollars to spend on a country place in Newport, the Berkshires or Long Island, and who don't want it colonial, have more or less got into the habit of coming to my quarter for their direction. That is the 1914-1915 status. In our separate departments — so — Birk and I have each succeeded in establishing a bit of transient vogue for ourselves.

But this wandering off into the present betrays how completely I have eased myself of the goad which originally set my hand to the memorialist's task.


Be sure, I don't for a moment wish to pose as a shoe-string Ancient Mariner. Yet, before I died, the history of that one terrible, bewildering episode in an otherwise normally commonplace and low-toned pair of lives had somehow to be put down. Somehow, that *had* to be! The only alternative person who could do it was Eloise; and she, as I need scarcely say, would not. I knew the labored, incoherent — the appalling — hash I should make of the job. Now, however, I am at any rate within sight of the last word, when I can drop these foreign and sweated tools, and think of the war, and go about my affairs.

During that summer of 1885, then, while I was engrossed in the quiet industrious stagger at my learned profession, Eloise and her grandaunt were spending the months in several isolated hamlets along the southern shore. I received always two, sometimes three, notes a week from Miss Lakeland; and wrote her back as many. With my girl I had not yet ventured to exchange a single direct word.

The May anniversary of our gulch meeting passed; and the July anniversary of our marriage. By August the two women had moved as far north as the mountains of Virginia. They were then within one night of New York. On the afternoon of the fourteenth of August, I wrote Eloise my first line — the first line I had really ever written her through the mails.

“Darling,—” I said.

“Won't you arrange to be in Montana by the middle of September? Please. I want you to, and I think I have a sufficient reason for asking the ordeal of you. Just take Miss Lakeland with you, and plan to arrive



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in Helena not later than the fifteenth. Nobody need know who you are — Miss Lakeland's name will cover everything. All that, though, I leave to you. I shall have either Scaramouch or Glendenning in Helena to meet you; at the train, if you wish; in any case, to assume full responsibility for the rest of the trip. From Helena, I'm afraid, you will have to drive; but I shall try to see to it that the overland part is made entirely comfortable for you both. Trust me, don't fret or worry — this is to be the path of our restoration and our eventual return. Won't you answer me, I beg, very soon?

“Thine,

“MATT.”

It was hardly a master-work of a letter. However, in her own handwriting, my girl quite simply agreed.

“I don't understand, and it will not be easy. But I shall go.”

Then I wrote added details to her; and packed up and quitted our proud little citadel of a Fifth Avenue office; and, forgetting Art, once more made my slow way across the gigantic plains of the Middle and Farther West. Using all the old protective coloring devices, I slipped into Piegan Springs again unnoticed. It was merely an uninspired repetition of the secret jaunt of last March.


Glendenning sat in his hotel room and stared at me, when I had unfolded my project. Nevertheless, he was mighty willing to undertake the Helena driving share of the enterprise; and caught the next coach for Billings and the territorial capital. Scaramouch I carried

off horseback to the gulch with me, as before. It did not seem in the slightest strange to be here now; to be making camp at the park, in just the wonted pastoral fashion, under the magnificent high arch of September sky. There was another summer herder still below at the wether station this year. But he proved a melancholy and taciturn elderly Dane, with as scant a stock of English as he had of social instinct. His presence on the scene amounted to practically nil.

All my preparations, I should say, I had laid out on a nice time schedule; and they came through exactly without hitch. Glendenning, Miss Lakeland and Eloise reached the gulch, driving via Rainbow, a trifle before noon of the twenty-fifth. From a foothill crest, I watched them approach through my field-glass. When they had got close, I hastily retreated back into the mountains. They must not see me yet — our guests. What did these castled mountains say to Eloise? . . .

At the park Scaramouch had one of his famous grouse-stews, with rice, simmering on the fire, waiting for them. The delicate New England ladies stood on no formality in paying their open-air respects to that; immediately succeeding which, Miss Lakeland, very worn with travel, retired to a fresh pine-scented couch we had spread for her in the cabin. . . . And then — then was to fall the true issue!

Under the almost straight rays of a sun glorious and vivid, Scaramouch set out with Eloise, guiding her back into the mountains after me, to a place we had already settled upon. It was an hour's long walk: I felt so acutely sorry for my poor girl. But I had rehearsed the Swede boy in saving her as much as possible on



the rough tramp — as if he would need a hint of such rehearsal! . . . The place he brought her to was the top of the declivity leading down into Doerck's sheer gully. There, according to instruction, he reluctantly swung about and left her.

From my nearby hiding-hole among the rocks, I observed him trudge heavily away, with many an anxious backward slue of eye. Eloise sank wearily on a log and slipped off her hat. She had probably stumbled over approximately this same trail once before, blindfolded, if only she could have guessed it! . . . I hoped she did not guess.

When Scaramouch had altogether disappeared from view among the lower timber, I pushed diffidently forth out of my nest of rocks. Quick Eloise jumped to her feet, her hat crushed in her trembling hand. For a stretched while, neither of us spoke. I swiftly took her all in, though; hungrily, from tip to toe; and, above every other consideration, a great wave of compassion for her broke over my sick soul. At her left temple, in the thick of the wonderful lustrous sweep of obsidian-black hair, was a patch of grayish-white, irregular, big as my cupped palm. Had that been there in the New Orleans hospital. . . . My God, white hairs! And she but twenty brief years old!

"You must forgive me for subjecting you to all this silly rigmarole," I mumbled. "It's only a few more steps now — just a few more little steps."

I whirled, and plunged violently down the rocky steep toward the bottom of the gully. I did not glance behind. But I could hear her unsteady feet obediently following. We crossed the narrow strip of bottom-land so, and climbed again to the rock-fissure on the

opposite side. When she had stopped, three yards from me, I pointed her attention to the jagged crevice in the ledge.

"Do you know what day this is?" I began, in a choked and jerking voice. But at least I had the sense not to wait for her reply. "A year ago to-day, almost to the hour, two men attacked you. Look! They both lie down there. Both. Under the piles of stones."

For another interminable space, silence hung between us. Then Eloise cried out, startlingly clear—"Not both?"

I nodded stupidly. "Both. Flynn and Doerck."

"But Doerck?" she insisted, wild and blind. "No, no—Doe~~ck~~ is not there!"

I could only mechanically go on nodding, like a figure wound with a key. "I dragged Rafe Doe~~ck~~'s body up to this crack myself. I tumbled him down there beside Whiskey with my own hands. I covered them both with rocks." Shifting, I indicated a *swag* in the lower levels of the ravine. "That is the entrance to his cave." I fumbled Grandmother Hainlen's precious old Norman heirloom out of my pocket. "Here is your ring."

She peered at me, uncomprehending, as if in a trance. And still, ninny-like, my wretched automaton of a head went on fatuously wagging up and down. The next thing I knew she had flung herself flat on the stone parapet, her face buried in her arms. Horrible rack-ing sobs tore at her. I did not dare to advance an inch.

When the paroxysm of weeping had passed, she rose, exhausted. Then—"You killed him?" she said.

"I suppose people would call it that."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"We began out here. It ended in the cave."

"Only a few days ago?"

"Last March."

"March?" she whispered. "Last March?"

"While you were in Cuba. There was snow on the ground."

"And — and — everybody has known — all these months — everybody but me? —"

"Nobody has known. Not a living creature. You are the first."

She grew very quiet; and I think I regained something of my own human equilibrium. The spot of white in the dark-meshed hair at her temple made her even more rare and appealing, more sensitively beautiful, than she had ever been before. Not girlish, but immeasurably beyond girlish. I worshiped her.

At length her long, grave, young eyes frankly and naturally rested on mine. "You were right," she said simply. "This would not have been so important earlier. The time — the pause — yes, it has helped."

I vented then the feeling that had been torturing me since spring. "I must have seemed an unspeakable cad to you all. Tamely sitting by, there."

She did not answer; but neither did she need to. With her eyes still wide and wonderingly fastened on mine, I could read the workings of her mind, as if through glass. . . . "Tamely sitting by?" . . . She had borne her unutterable indignity here — child that she was — for my sake; to protect me. It would never

have occurred to her to blame me for accepting this protection. She expected little of the world.

Yet — now — the sudden primal realization that such sacrifices may not be! . . . Pride and gratitude and tenderness struggled up in her. And remorse! She swayed on her feet.

"We must get away from here!" I burned with restless excitement. "Do you see why I brought you? I just had to tell you these things — beside his actual grave. That's all!"

"Yes," she murmured. She took a farewell shuddering look down into the ragged crevice. "We can go now."

"And don't ever forget," I persisted, "that it was March. Already you have been free six months."

"I shall remember."

Doctor James Duncannon's daughter — how intelligent she was, how she understood! Absolutely no idea of flummery. She did not quibble, seek to evade any fact.


"And your ring?"

"Keep it for me."

We turned, and descended to the ravine-bottom. But she could barely manage to stagger along.

"Let me help you to the top of the ridge?" I begged.

She shook her head. In single file, therefore, as we had come down, so we toiled snail-like back up the steep gully wall. But at the crest I made her sit on the log. Then I signaled to Scaramouch with my gun; and he and I built a kind of litter for her out of poles and our cradled coats; and we carried her mostly into camp that way.



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Toward the close of the next spring (1886), we were married, quite formally, for the third time. The ceremony (a civil one, to make the list complete) was performed in Florence, with only the necessary witnesses. Our ordinary married life, childless and uneventful, has dated from then. Often since we have been happy. Often. Monotony, dullness, disappointment, despair — these also we have known. But never, I think, for good or ill, in the souls of either of us — never has dimmed the strange desert memory-flower of those first freighted days spent once on the summer range. . . .

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THE END

THE following pages contain advertisements of a few
of the Macmillan novels.



H. G. WELLS' NEW NOVEL

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By H. G. WELLS

With frontispiece, \$1.75

Mr. Wells calls his new novel "The Story of An Education"; the education of two unusually interesting young people whose lives touch many of the most (revolutionary) radical and artistic movements in English life during the last two decades. In the study of the characters of Joan and Peter, Mr. Wells has done some of his finest, most revealing and brilliant work. It is reminiscent in manner of *The New Machiavelli*, which is to say that it does for the subject of education what *The New Machiavelli* does in the field of politics.

Every one read and discussed that former work; it is more than likely that *Joan and Peter* will find equally wide reading.

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BY WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

Author of *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me*,
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The dominant theme of *In the Heart of a Fool* is suggested by its title. It is primarily the story of a man, Thomas van Dorn, who says in his heart, "There is no God," and who sets himself up to take what he wants from society with the complacent belief that he can take as much as he wants without impairing his powers or his personality. The scene of the novel is a Kansas town; its growth from the days of its settlement to the time that it is a flourishing industrial center is portrayed. In this town are many interesting people who figure in the story. Dr. Nesbit, a kindly, delightful, well-intentioned man, who nevertheless has his point of moral obtuseness on the side of politics; Mrs. Nesbit; their daughter, Laura; Margaret Müller; Amos Adams, an idealistic printer with a tendency to spiritualism; his wife; their son, Grant Adams, who inherits all of the idealism and part of the visionary quality of his parents,—these are but a few of them. They are all alive and the incidents in which they figure compose what is sure to be voted a notable addition to American fiction.

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

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By EDEN PHILLPOTTS

Author of *Brunel's Tower*, *Old Delabole*, etc.

Mr. Phillpotts' work is always thoughtful and sincere and goes beneath the surface of things. His new novel, as in the case of *Brunel's Tower* and several other of his later writings, takes one of the big industries as its background, and tells against this a compelling, human story.

Essentially, it is a study of hatred; it centers about the deep, inborn hatred of a boy for his father, who had refused to marry his mother after he had promised her to do so, really because he had come into a large property and did not think the working girl the right wife for him, although he tries to persuade himself that it is because of his philosophic views on marriage.

The climax which the tale reaches is vivid and powerful. Altogether the work is one which bears out Phillpotts' reputation for sustained and beautiful work.

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By ZOË BECKLEY

With illustrations

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